University of Alberta

The Sign of the Wound: Trauma, Sadomasochism, and Death in the Extremist Texts of Laura Kasischke, Darcey Steinke, and Kathy Acker

by

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INTRODUCTION:

The Probing of the Wound in Contemporary Culture

[M]*odernity has come to be understood under the sign of the wound.*
Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers* 266-67

Death nurtures life. This is the significance of the wound. […] *residue of indestructible life which survives death.*
Parveen Adams, "Cars and Scars" 67

Only negative experience is worthy of our attention, to my thinking, but this experience is rich enough.
Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death & Sensuality* 23

To be human is finally to be a loser, for we are all fated to lose our carefully constructed sense of self, our physical strength, our health, our precious dignity, and finally our lives.
Mary Gaitskill, "Victims and Losers" 105

This dissertation looks at the presence of violence, wounding, abjection, sadomasochism, and death in the texts of select contemporary American women writers including Laura Kasischke, Darcey Steinke, and the late Kathy Acker. The project for this thesis began when I first read Acker's novel *In Memoriam to Identity* published in 1990. What struck me first about *In Memoriam* was not necessarily Acker's plagiaristic intertextual experimentalism, her neo-avant-gardism, or her transgression of the limits of intelligibility, but something much simpler: the brutalized and yet provocatively resilient voices of the mostly female protagonists inhabiting her fiction. I not only liked Acker's heroines, but I knew that somehow I was like them as well—that my experience of the world too had often been one of shock and loss. Although compelled by the wounded, fragmented figures of her novel (by Airplane who envisions "the death of love," and by Capitol who wants, as she simply says, "to suicide" and "to be dead" [111, 264, 168]), nothing in my previous (mostly canonical) reading experience—for instance, neither the sadomasochistic depictions of a writer like Emily Brontë, nor the later naturalist bodily depictions of an avant-garde experimentalist like James Joyce—prepared me for Acker's raw portrayals of variously hurt, diseased, infected, pierced, or pummeled bodies. With Acker's honest literature of the body I had found something different and real to me in a way that most other literary productions had not been.

My experience with Acker led me in search of other women writers similarly preoccupied by marginal feminine experience and lured in their own way by the negative. What I discovered was a provocative grouping of contemporary women authors—American, Canadian, British, New Zealander, and French for instance—writing in a dark, counter tradition and drawn toward abjection and various states of woundedness. Apart from Acker's fiction, American author Laura Kasischke's debut novel *Suspicious River* (1996)—about female masochistic eroticism pushed to the limit of death—and American writer Darcey Steinke's third novel *Jesus Saves* (1997)—about child abduction, traumatic repetition, and dying—both stand out in my mind as being among the most finely written, albeit lurid, traumatic accounts of what it is like to go all the way with the "obscene Thing,"[1] risk everything, and in fact look death in the face. While Kasischke's *Suspicious River* and Steinke's *Jesus Saves* both differently present us with difficult, traumatic material, and while the following two thesis chapters are devoted to discussing their novels respectively, Acker's narrative production as a whole provides sustained attention to questions of female abjection, traumatic wounding, and death. Consequently, I devote three full chapters to an exploration of Acker's late works including *In*

Memoriam to Identity (1990), *My Mother: Demonology* (1993), and *Eurydice in the Underworld* (1997).

Kasischke, Steinke, and Acker present us with some of the most unsettling and provocative portrayals of how woundedness has become a contemporary means of imagining the self or of locating the subject. In *Suspicious River*, for instance, Kasischke's female protagonist, Leila, views herself catastrophically as "a dry, abandoned field set on fire by a homely little girl" (130). Throughout the narrative she comes closer and closer in fact to dying, and hence to making her morbid, personal imaginary a troubling reality. In *Jesus Saves*, Steinke's abducted girl heroine similarly comes to see herself not as "flesh flushed with moving blood," but in much more abject, debased terms as "dead flesh, blue-gray and puffy" (54). Acker's female protagonists also are explicit about the fact that their stories, to use Capitol's words from *In Memoriam*, have something to do with dying, "something to do with opened-out flesh [...] vulnerable skin [...] bruised [...] hurt" (154, 162). In a collection called *The Eight Technologies of Otherness* (which includes works by various film-makers, philosophers, photographers, political theorists, and significantly also Kathy Acker's play called *Requiem*), editor Sue Golding asks what would happen in postmodernity "if we were to stop sterilizing the wounds"? ("A word" xii). I mention this because what I appreciate most about the different novelists under study in this dissertation is that each of them refuses the kind of sterilization about which Golding speaks; each speaks the worst and, in doing so, takes seriously things like disease, the body, sadomasochism, violence, and the death drive.

Although many people would prefer not to discuss such potentially contentious and terrifying things, they are increasingly part of our personal and social experience, and consequently deserve our urgent attention.[2] In other words, because Acker, Steinke, and Kasischke engage in difficult, experimental work (they explore limit-experiences that most readers would perhaps prefer to ignore), critical commentary on or collaboration with their texts is, I think, crucial. In this dissertation I provide close textual readings of the novels under study, while also placing these works in relation to one another and within the larger contemporary cultural context in which they are produced. I see myself as occupying the role of the critic, but the critic as both interpreter as well as fellow explorer into often dangerous and contentious territory. In the following chapters I use various theories of trauma, sacrifice, sadomasochism, and abjection to help illuminate Acker's, Kasischke's, and Steinke's difficult literary projects; however, my interest in these writers is not just academic but also personal. I am drawn to these texts simply because, for me, they resonate—the experiences they recount, although often more brutal than anything I have experienced, are disturbingly familiar and real.

The remainder of this introduction is divided into three main sections: the first looks at Mark Seltzer's recent work on "wound culture" and Georges Bataille's philosophizing on subjects like death, eroticism, and sacrifice in order to suggest a cultural and theoretical context in which to locate Acker, Steinke, and Kasischke. The second section surveys the cultural field at large over approximately the last twenty years—considering everything from alternative music to avant-garde photography—in order to contextualize further the primary novelists of study and to uncover their larger sociocultural relevance. While I situate the main authors of study and my own work as well largely within the Bataillean tradition of excess, I also see Acker, Kasischke, and Steinke (and myself) as feminists. The introduction's third part aims consequently to locate the discussion specifically within feminist discourse.

Part 1: Seltzer's "Wound Culture" and Bataillean Heterological Excess

Although Kasischke's, Steinke's, and Acker's texts offer some of the most cogent explorations of a nihilist and hence paradoxical form of selfhood, their works comprise only part of a growing and pervasive body of cultural production—not only novelistic, but also visual, performative, filmic, musical, and theoretical—negatively devoted to the figure of the wound. In both his essay, "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere," and his book, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*, Mark Seltzer has recently begun to explore and to map this negative (or what he calls "pathological") devotion in the American cultural field at large. Seltzer's investigations have significantly impacted my own work and the direction of this thesis: both how I read and how I contextualize Kasischke's, Steinke's, and Acker's productions owe much to Seltzer's notion of "wound culture." In the following pages, consequently, I provide a brief account of what Seltzer means by "wound culture," linking his thought in the process to many of George Bataille's theorizations of sacrifice and death.

Discussing everything from mass media to "higher" art (everything from the traumatized look of runway fashion models to confession TV to the popular television series *ER* to J. G. Ballard's *Crash* to Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* to the recent serial killer movies *Virtuosity* and *Copycat*), Seltzer uses the term "wound culture" to designate what he sees as a growing "public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and open persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound" ("WC" 3). Citing Mary Ann Doane, who argues that atrocity or "'[c]atastrophe [...] is at some level always about the body, about the encounter with death,'" Seltzer sees wound culture as characterized by a deep fixation upon the body—its boundaries, vulnerabilities, and proximity to death (*SK* 35). Wound culture, put simply, in some way stages the reality of the corpse. Although Seltzer's focus is on what makes up wound culture today, he in fact locates the advent of wound culture as far back as Stephen Crane's 1895 publication of *The Red Badge of Courage*. He also draws attention briefly to Sigmund Freud's and Walter Benjamin's different theorizations of modernity and the modern subject as "inseparable from the categories of shock and trauma" (*SK* 266), but suggests at the same time the postmodern intensification of the wound as "a flash point" for "locating the subject" ("WC" 4). "Trauma," says Seltzer, "is nothing if not in fashion today" ("WC" 15). For Seltzer, not only are we presently psychosocially fixated on trauma and the wound (pathologically so), but a sociality has emerged which is tied to the probing of private bodily and psychic interiors. Seltzer theorizes a form of mimetic spectatorship in which trauma "registers" both on the levels of "private fantasy" and "public event" to the extent that we can speak of the "coalescence of psychology and collectivity" (of what he calls a "collective-subjective") located in pain, lacerations, and wounds ("WC" 25). He writes: "In wound culture, the very notion of sociality is bound to the excitations of the torn and opened body, the torn and exposed individual as public spectacle. [...] torn bodies express […] the promise of this awful entanglement: the sociality of the wound" ("WC" 3-4 25).

In reading Seltzer, I hear echoes of Georges Bataille, in whose tradition Steinke has been said to write, and who Acker cites as a major influence on her own work, giving him a voice in fact in *My Mother: Demonology*.[3] In *Serial Killers*, Seltzer himself does briefly mention Bataille: in a note he credits Bataille "and the 'sacred sociology' of the surrealists […for] setting out a notion of a social bond irreducible to identity and premised on a wounded but therefore opened singularity" (292). While the above comment marks the extent of Seltzer's acknowledgement of any critical indebtedness to Bataille, numerous correspondences or points of interest exist between them. For instance, Bataille's theory of heterology or heterogeneity (outlined extensively in his essay, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism") might in fact encompass the products of wound culture. As Bataille describes it, "the *heterogeneous* world includes everything resulting from *unproductive* expenditure […] everything rejected by *homogeneous* society [or the dominant, capitalist order of utilitarian exchange value] as waste" ("Fascism" 142). Bataille says, for example, that "[*v*]*iolence, excess, delirium, madness,* […] the excessive nature of a decomposing body," as well as poetry, most forms of eroticism, and "the waste products of the body" are all "to varying degrees" heterogeneous ("Fascism" 142). Significantly, he also stresses that "[*h*]*eterogeneous* existence can be represented as something *other*," and that "[*h*]*eterogeneous* reality is that of a force or shock. It presents itself as a charge […] in the judgements of the subject" ("Fascism" 143). In the 1930's with the writing of "The Psychological Structure of Fascism" and other essays as well, Bataille called not only for a heterological socio-political practice (that would see the overthrowing of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat), but also for a heterological aesthetic practice that would introduce "a lawless series into the world of legitimate thought" ("The Pineal" 80). Postmodern wound culture—with its emphasis upon shock, trauma, abjection, and the unproductive reality of the corpse—marks the manifestation, I believe, of such a heterological practice. In other words, with the eruption of violent, abject representation and of a collective subjectivity located not necessarily in "collective production" (Bataille, "Fascism" 138), but rather in collective loss, we are seeing in wound culture today the growing development of a "lawless [aesthetic or intellectual] series" along the lines Bataille I think envisioned.

There are other provocative intersections between Seltzer's and Bataille's thought. Seltzer's notion of an emerging, new "sociality of the wound," for instance, resonates with what Bataille has to say about expenditure, sacrifice, eroticism, and death. Briefly, in "The Notion of Expenditure," Bataille outlines his theory about potlatch and argues that "human society can have [...] an *interest* in considerable losses, in catastrophes that, *while conforming to well-defined needs*, provoke tumultuous depression, crises of dread, and in the final analysis, a certain orgiastic state" (117). Bataille writes: "Men assure their own subsistence or avoid suffering, not because these functions themselves lead to a sufficient result, but in order to accede to the insubordinate function of [loss or] free expenditure" (129). Against productive social activity (regrettably, Bataille argues, the "most appreciable share of life is given" to this), Bataille privileges the "principle of loss" (or what elsewhere he calls "the law by which we seek the greatest loss" [*AS* 2: 105]), which he says is manifest in sacrificial social structures

(117, 118). Later, in "The College of Sociology," Bataille argues that with the opening of a body in ritual sacrifice (and ultimately with the loss of that body), sociality or social bonding becomes possible. Bataille's theory is that when we are confronted with another person's death (with the reality of the lacerated body), our sense of inviolate identity dissolves as we see ourselves in the wound and share in the fact that we are all bodies that die. Bataille is most explicit in the following passage:

> I propose to admit, as a law, that human beings are only united with each other through rents and wounds; this notion has [...] a certain logical force. If elements are put together to form a whole, this can easily happen when each one loses, through a rip in its integrity, a part of its own being, which goes to benefit the communal being. Initiations, sacrifices, and festivals represent so many moments of loss and communication between individuals. ("The College" 251)

Following this assertion about how loss or the wound engenders community, Bataille goes on to propose a link between "ritual laceration" and "sexual laceration" (251), a link he broaches also in *Eroticism: Death & Sensuality*, where he tells us that eroticism is "a violation bordering on death" and hence comparable to sacrifice, that "Death opens the way to the denial of our individual lives," and that "continuity of existence [...] *is even proved by death*" (17, 24, 21).

For Bataille as for Seltzer, then, social attachments (what Seltzer calls "sociality" and what Bataille variously calls "communication," the "continuity of existence," or simply "community") develop most vividly in instances of loss, in the presence of the naked, exposed, or violated body. One difference between Seltzer and Bataille, however, is that whereas Seltzer locates wound culture in various cultural products—in books, fashion, film, and on TV—Bataille privileges literature, arguing that it "only has inherited sacrifice as a legacy," and that "this longing to lose, to lose ourselves and to look death in the face, found in the ritual of sacrifice [is] a satisfaction [...we] still [...get] from the reading of novels" (*AS*, 2: 106).

Like Bataille, I believe that literature is a prime location where heterogeneous experience (experience that perhaps can never be fully elucidated or articulated in rational or philosophical discourses, experiences, for instance, like sacrificial desire or masochistic eroticism) can be most cogently glimpsed, presented, and worked through. The most compelling writing I think seeks to uncover and to probe such raw experience that has often been disavowed, silenced, or repressed in the dominant cultural imaginary. If we believe, furthermore, writers like Maurice Blanchot or Giorgio Agamben, who theorize the relationship of language and death (Blanchot says that "death is present in language" simply because "the word excludes the existence of what it designates" ["Literature and the Right to Death" 44], while Agamben—drawing upon Heidegger's notion of *being-toward-death* and Hegel's notion of our consignment to death through the Word—tells us that the voice is a death drive, that "the experience of death and the experience of the voice are tightly linked" [*Language and Death* xii, 95]), then literature, as Bataille suggests, is perhaps uniquely situated to take stock of nihilistic experiences, or feelings of sacrificial or "lethal *jouissance*."[4]

However, literature is by no means the only place where such sensitive, multitudinous, and often contradictory material is effectively expressed or presented in some sort of provisional coherence. Like Seltzer (although my interest is in more extremist forms of wound culture), I see the figure of the wound asserting itself in various ways, in a broad cultural field. I view the primary literary texts of study in this dissertation, moreover, not as isolated productions, but rather in a context of interrelation—as part of a larger wound culture, or larger contemporary tendency to present the self or subject not as clean, proper, and unbroken (as Julia Kristeva might put it), but instead as open, vulnerable, self-sacrificial, and allied to death. My aim, consequently, in the second section of this chapter is to provide an introduction to Kasischke's, Steinke's, and Acker's works by taking stock of the larger cultural and artistic context in which their narratives are embedded or out of which they emerge. While wound culture may have its roots in the advent of modernism (in the "shock and contact with the metropolitan masses," to borrow from Walter Benjamin ["On Some Motifs" 165]), its recent intensification leads me to limit my survey to an exploration of images of wounded loss as they appear in approximately the last twenty years. Building on Seltzer's work (and with reference to Bataille and other social theorists as well), I focus my attention in the pages that follow, then, on various artists, musicians, filmmakers, and theorists (from the pop cultural to the avant-garde) who stand out in my mind as being among the most audacious, recent producers of wound culture.

Part 2: The Wound in Fashion, Music, Film, Music Videos, Photography, and Theory

Since I began to view postmodern culture in relation to the notion of woundedness, I have observed various phenomena—images, advertisements, fashion trends, films, musical productions, and so forth—that seem to locate the self at the broken boundaries of the body, or that provide a possible point of identification in the realms of trauma and atrocity. I see wound culture, for instance, in the still present death or "goth garb" and Marilyn Mansonesque, counter-cultural self-styling of young urban misfits. With its emphasis on dark, grim clothes, carnivalesque make-up, and colorless flesh, Goth promotes unreservedly the antiaesthetic of the corpse. At the opposite end of the fashion spectrum, high fashion companies like *Chanel* and *Dolce & Gabanna* (that normally cultivate "the style of immortality [...] where nothing decays, or gets old" [Emberley, "The Fashion Apparatus" 59]) also flirt with and try to capitalize on wound culture's lethal appeal by featuring their clothes (recently in some avant-garde European fashion magazines)[5] not, as is their usual practice, on beautiful, unmarred bodies, but in fact on cut, scarred, or otherwise damaged ones. While *Chanel*'s and *Dolce & Gabanna*'s recent photographic subversions of the dominant fashion ideology of endless youth and beauty is a rare occurrence in the industry, it does hint nonetheless at a shift occurring in our conception of the subject.

One place where we see in fact ample evidence of this shift (toward the wound as the locus of the subject) is in the sadomasochistic aesthetic of the now virtually commonplace "neo-tribal" body modification practices (like tattooing, piercing, and self-scarification) of people throughout the Western world. Walking through the streets today of almost any North American or European city, no one could fail to notice these self-imposed markings on the body, or the way in which the body today has become a privileged site of sadomasochistic inscription. In her article, "Cut in the Body: From

Clitoridectomy to Body Art," Renata Salecl has recently asked how we might understand this "return to the cut in the body that happens in the post-modern society" (29). Discussing everything from excessive dieting and exercise to plastic surgery to body piercing to clitoridectomy to the masochistic performance art of "Body Radicals" like Orlan and Bob Flanagan, Salecl argues that the return to the cut in the body in postmodernity may mark attempts by the subject "to find some stability in today's disintegrating social universe," or "to find in the body the site of the real" (31, 39). The "masochistic turn in body art," Salecl furthermore contends, "appears as a solution to the deadlocks of individualization," as a means, put otherwise, of establishing "group identity" or sociality in a world in which conventional bonds of family and community have broken down (28, 31-32). Also provocative is Salecl's insight that contemporary body mutilation practices show the subject taking "initiation into his or her own hands" at a time when the authority of the "big Other" (or the symbolic order) is increasingly under question and attack (37). In the light of Salecl's comments about self-initiation and about finding in the body the place of the real, one might also add that sacrifice still has an echo in various body mutilation practices where the laceration or brand both disrupts personal homogeneity, and signals (in the case, for instance, of tattooing and piercing practices) community in marginality. In her novel *Empire of the Senseless*, Acker makes the similar point that tattoos indicate "tribal identity." Today, she writes, "a tattoo is [ambiguously] considered both a defamatory brand and a symbol of a tribe or of a dream" (130). In marking her own flesh with excessive tattoos and piercings (in being "Carved into roses," as she describes the act of being tattooed in *Empire* [86]), Acker herself distinctly claims allegiance with the tribe of the marginal, disavowed, and tainted.

Alongside certain contemporary body art practices, fashion aesthetics (or antiaesthetics), and model-fashion-victim trends, the alternative music scene is another space where especially pointed instances of present-day wound culture emerge. Although diverse artists and groups from The Sex Pistols to The Doors to more recent grunge bands like Nirvana and Hole variously exhibit and advance a fascination with negativity, despair, and death, Nine Inch Nails's lead vocalist and writer, Trent Reznor, is to my mind the most provocative recent practitioner of wound culture.[6] Loss, decay, masochistic masculinity, automutilation, and death—these are Reznor's traumatic-thematic obsessions. With less reserve or squeamishness in fact than any musician I can think of, Reznor writes and performs elegaically with nothing less than his own degradation and ultimate annihilation irreducibly in view.

In relation to Reznor, I would like to turn again briefly to Bataille, whose theories about unproductive expenditure and sacrifice help I think to illuminate Reznor's moribund musical production. In "The Notion of Expenditure," Bataille advocates the return of an economy of risk, loss, sacrifice, destruction, libidinal release, and "limitless degradation" in order "heterologically" to counteract what he considers to be the present bourgeois, capitalist state of social stagnation in which processes of accumulation, rather than those of free and "nonproductive expenditure," dominate social life (119, 117). In the same essay, Bataille in fact links some aesthetic practice with the "insubordinate function of free expenditure" (129). "The term poetry," he writes, "applied to the [...] least intellectualized forms of the expression of a state of loss, can be considered synonymous with expenditure; it in fact signifies, in the most precise way, creation by means of loss. Its meaning is therefore close to that of *sacrifice*" (120). Trent Reznor, I contend, uses language, instrumentation, and industrial sound precisely for the symbolization of his own loss, and for the strange purpose also of *memento mori*. In these regards, his melodic production might be considered *à la* Bataille as "synonymous with expenditure," and as characteristic of heterogeneous sacrificial practice outside of the dominant or homogenous social order.

The albums *Pretty Hate Machine* (1989), *further down the spiral* (1995), and *The Fragile* (1999) all develop Reznor's subversive and self-sacrificial poetics of mourning. "Sin," for instance, from *Pretty Hate Machine* contains the self-deprecating lyrics: "I'm just an effigy to be defaced to be disgraced." In different tracks from *The Fragile*, Reznor likewise performs his allegiance to the negative figures, so-to-speak, of degradation and deterioration. For example, in "Somewhat Damaged" Reznor tells us that he is "broken bruised forgotten sore / too fucked up to care anymore"; he has, he says, "lost [...his] faith in everything [...] / made the choice to go away / drink the fountain of decay." The song "Ripe (With Decay)" also expresses the excitations of loss, providing a massive instrumental expenditure played provocatively at the masochistic expense, it seems, of the artist himself. However, with its shocking clash of melody and mechanized machinery, the album *further down the spiral* is Reznor's exploration *par excellence* of the erotics of self-expenditure pushed toward the final limit of death. Composed of songs with morose titles like "the art of self-destruction, part one," "self-destruction, part two," "self-destruction, final," "the beauty of being numb," "hurt (quiet)," "erased," and "erased, over, out," *further down the spiral* leaves little doubt about Reznor's participation in wound culture, or in what Bataille I believe would appreciate as the radical pursuit of creation through the negative engagement with loss, destruction, and self-sacrifice.[7]

That Reznor's influence is widespread and in fact transgenerational—that he gives voice not only to his peers or to the disgruntled youth of our times, but also to earlier generations—is evidenced by Johnny Cash's surprising 2003 rendition (included on the CD, *Johnny Cash – American IV: The Man Comes Around)* of Reznor's track "hurt (quiet)" from *further down the spiral*. Thematizing drug addiction and nihilist desire, the song includes the lyrics: "I hurt myself today to see if I still feel / I focus on the pain, the only thing that's real / The needle tears a hole, the old familiar sting / Try to kill it all away, but I remember everything." Cash's *Hurt* video directed by Mark Romanek furthermore accentuates the song's place in wound culture. With its sacrificial Christian iconography, its old footage of Cash (including glimpses of his defiant concert at Folsom prison), in addition to its new representations of Cash frankly aged, broken, and singing about giving away his "empire of dirt"—this is the most emotionally poignant video I have ever seen. Images in the video of things like Cash's abandoned childhood home and *The Johnny Cash Museum* "closed to the public" suggest a grim fixation on obsolescence, on life lived and waning to the point of death. Cash's actual death on September 12, 2003 shortly following his video shoot with Romanek makes *Hurt* all the more melancholically suggestive.

While the alternative and industrial (and country) music scenes offer glimpses of damaged selves and the will toward destruction, in film we see I think a more elaborate, ubiquitous, and often eroticized display of bodies *in extremis*—of bodies that die, get hurt, violently drug-addicted, cut, or amputated. From David Fincher's popular film version of Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club* (1999) to David Cronenberg's screening of J. G. Ballard's controversial novel *Crash* (1997) to Darren Aronofsky's disturbing movie *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) to Peter Greenaway's strange avant-garde film *A Zed & Two Noughts* (1985) to Lynne Stopkewich's cinematic version of Laura Kasischke's *Suspicious River* (2000) to Steven Shainberg's dark, comedic adaptation of Mary Gaitskill's story "Secretary" (2002)—the list could go on—we have seen in recent years diverse and proliferating cinematic representations of a new model of subjecthood founded on the wound. Like Reznor's art of self-annihilation (but on a grander social scale), Fincher's *Fight Club* offers a "theatre of mass destruction" or theatre of Artaudian cruelty and mayhem,[8] in which the ideal is to inflict and receive tangible lacerations, to "stop being perfect," "to hit bottom," "to die with [...] scars," "to know [simply] that someday you're gonna die," that "[t]his is your life and it's ending one minute at a time." In *Fight Club*, the mostly male protagonists feel nothing and have no sense of purpose or place in a consumer, commodity culture where "nothing is real. Everything's far away; everything's a copy of a copy of a copy." It is not until they join "fight club" that they escape the experience of life as simulacra and experience something literal in the cuts and bruises that now mark their flesh. In fight club, the men find in their bodies the site of the real and become, paradoxically, a "saved" community of men united (to use Bataille's terms) by "rents and wounds" and "limitless [self-] degradation," and by the belief (as Tyler Durden played by Brad Pitt says) that, "without pain, without sacrifice we have nothing." "Only after disaster can we become resurrected." The success and popularity of this film (it was Oscar-nominated and grossed over thirty seven million dollars in the United States alone) suggests certainly that in our time of commodity culture and utilitarian exchange value, we have reactively and collectively become drawn to and anxious for popular rites of sacrificial loss and release.

In both Cronenberg's *Crash* and Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*, different socialities of the wound also emerge. A Bataillean exploration of the relationships between pleasure, sex, wounding, and death, *Crash* is a strange film eroticizing the car accident and its remainders in the form of the wound or scar. In *Crash*, the main protagonist James Ballard (played by James Spader) becomes part of a community of wounded crash victims following his own highway accident in which he is badly hurt. This community of wounded beings (which includes Ballard, as well as Vaughan played by Elias Koteas, Helen Remington played by Holly Hunter, Gabriella played by Rosanna Arquette, and others) experience the most profound social and sexual connections to one another specifically in the lethal figuration of the car accident. In *Crash*, the relation between the shattering of the body and the notion of sociality is explicit as numerous scenes reveal the car crash as an occasion for contact, eroticism, and social connectivity. The wound, then, essentially becomes in this film a paradoxical opportunity for erotic celebration and alliance. However, where *Crash* eroticizes the wound and the drive toward destruction and death, *Requiem for a Dream* in fact does quite the opposite with its unspeakably sad, dire look at what future attends the drug-addicted body. In *Requiem*, although all of the four major protagonists dream in their own way about social recognition or about finding a proper place in the symbolic order, Aronofsky's disturbing film uncovers this dream as a fiction—as an abject failure and catastrophe. Ultimately, what connects the individuals in *Requiem*—what makes them a collective subjectivity of sorts—is not their shared desire for a better life, but rather their shared and bathetic recognition of the body as a masochistically addicted space of suffering, as a site of real, abject horror. The film's conclusion—with its shocking, interlocking, serial *tableau vivants* of prostitution, amputation, racism, and electric shock therapy—presents us most disturbingly with a de-idealized (and certainly not celebratory) depiction of a sociality of the wound. I cannot overstate the difficulty of watching Aronofsky's grim film about irrevocable loss that will never it seems be worked through.

Presenting us with differently discomforting cinematic material, Greenaway, Stopkewich, and Shainberg are also fixated in their own ways on the wound or cut. Although Greenaway's films have been noticed less by American audiences than by European ones, I include him in this discussion as a producer of wound culture for two reasons: first, because of the unflinching way in which he confronts us with the real in the form of flesh decomposing one (filmically or photographically representational) moment at a time; and second, because Kathy Acker was a fan of his, writing about him (and coincidentally revealing her own artistic fixations) in an essay called "The World According to Peter Greenaway," in which she discusses both *A Zed & Two Noughts* and the more popular movie *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*. On *A Zed & Two Noughts*, Acker writes: the film "is about twinship [...]. We look at pictures of maggots breeding in order to penetrate the mysteries of life and death; seeing rot teaches us about those twins: life and death. Greenaway always turns to the human physical processes, especially digestion and putrification, in order to discover what is truly natural" (49-50). The body, the abject body, certainly, is Greenaway's preoccupation. *A Zed & Two*

Noughts begins with a car accident, two deaths, and an amputation. The scenes that follow set out to explore how those affected by the crash perform their mourning. In the case of the separated Siamese twins Oswald and Oliver Deuce, who lose their wives in the accident, death becomes an opportunity for mimetic reproduction or reiteration. Obsessed with decay and with measuring it through time-lapsed photography, the twins move from recording the decomposition of fruit to documenting the decay of fish, fowl, amphibians, and large mammals. The film ends with them photographing their own deaths and retrogression "back to where they came from: ooze, slime, muck." They do all of this—including archiving their own deaths and physical ruin—both to "measure degrees of grief" and for purposes, as they say, of "completeness." What Greenaway ultimately I think shows us in this film is the subject's fundamental disautonomy and transmutability—he shows us the subject, I quote Blanchot, as "death in the process of becoming" ("Literature" 55).

In both her acclaimed film *Kissed* (based on Barbara Gowdy's short story called "We So Seldom Look on Love") and in her more recent movie *Suspicious River* (based upon Laura Kasischke's work), Canadian filmmaker Lynne Stopkewich also reveals a morbid cinematic eye for abjection and death. To my mind, Stopkewich's cinematic representations are in the tradition of Bataille, specifically the Bataille of *Eroticism: Death & Sensuality* where he tells us that pushed to the limit, erotic desire is the desire paradoxically for death, and where he asks: "What does physical eroticism signify if not a violation [...] bordering on death, bordering on murder?" (17). Both Stopkewich's films in some way mourn sex as they both explore the melancholic linking of eroticism and death in young women's lives. While *Kissed* articulates necrophiliac feminine desire and the fetishization of the corpse, the film *Suspicious River* shows us equally contentious material with its depiction of masochistic female eroticism pushed beyond the pleasure principle to the most troubling, lethal limit of a rape/death wish. Stopkewich's work might be located in the tradition not only of Bataille, but also in the tradition of Cronenberg, on whose film, *Crash*, Stopkewich worked in fact as a production designer before launching her own career as a director/cinematographer. Both filmmakers differently show us the pleasure of atrocity and the ties between sex and death, *eros* and *thanatos*: Cronenberg does so at the scene of the crash, Stopkewich at the troubling site of the rape scene. Both Cronenberg's and Stopkewich's productions show us, furthermore, the erotic charge of wound culture, or of a nihilistic culture in which sex becomes a violent catastrophe scene—a site of loss and disaccumulation.

Steven Shainberg's recent s&m sex comedy *Secretary* offers us a much different instance of wound culture than any of the other films discussed above. *Secretary* shows us the wound not in the tragic (or cynical) mode of death, but in the comedic (albeit dark comedic) mode of marriage. In his work on the wounded body in literature from Homer to Toni Morrison, Dennis Patrick Slattery tells us that the wound "reveals a memory, a site of pain, of suffering and death, but it can also include a joyful sense of new freedom as well" (16). The wound or brand as site of potential happiness and release: this is the subject of Shainberg's *Secretary*. The film shows us, in other words, the possibility that wound culture might have a different side—quirky and playful, rather than necessarily depressing and melancholic. *Secretary* is about a fragile, bland, recently institutionalized young woman named Lee Holloway (played by Maggie Gyllenhaal), who cuts herself habitually as a remedy for social and familial disconnection, and as a means also of relieving the tension occasioned by excessive social withdrawal. Hungry for contact, Lee literally tries to open herself to something other through self-inflicted cuts in the flesh. She tries both to let the world in and herself out through cuts in the body. As the film unfolds, Lee's self-cutting eventually gives way to office s / m with her lawyer boss played by James Spader. Initially bewildered by Spader's domineering character, Lee soon reveals a predilection for being dominated, and a corresponding calculated submissiveness in which s / m sex play delivers a welcome shock of contact with another person. In the tradition of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (albeit with a differently gendered script), at the film's end we see Lee as empowered masochist, ultimately directing her and her lover's interactions, asserting a newly found sexuality, and controlling the humiliations she receives.

The film, although generally well-received, has been maligned for its sweetening of Mary Gaitskill's story, in which no marriage takes place (as it does in the film), and in which the heroine's reactions to being dominated and spanked include not only prompt sexual arousal, but simultaneously also "uncomplicated disgust" (Gaitskill, "Secretary" 146). Some film critics, while enjoying the film's naughty chic, lament the movie's romanticizations as well as the softening of Gaitskill's more contentious issues. David Cornelius, for instance, says that the film "could have given us some masochism-as-office-life-satire, or self-mutilation-as a-serious-issue drama. But no, *Secretary*, is, disappointingly, nothing but a comedy" ("Secretary," http://www.rottentomatoes). Richard von Busack is also discontented that the film "changes what once was a male/female cold war into a disturbing but harmless power exchange" ("Spanks for the Memories," http://www.metroactive). Although I admire Shainberg's positive cinematic representations of the wound and his insight that the sadomasochistically wounded body might gain, I quote Slattery, "something not possessed before" (7), the disgruntled critics I cite above tell us something, I think, about the audience of wound culture. Alert to possible sterilizations or romanticizations of the wound, they want it seems nothing less than the real behind the fiction. Eager themselves to probe the wound, reviewers like Cornelius and von Busack are not satisfied with cinema that could go further—that could, in other words, elaborate the image of the wound, tarry with it, and thereby foster our desire for the marks on our skin to have depth.

This lure of the real or the desire to arrest our gaze at the site of the wound—in the depth of a wounded body—is something Hal Foster in fact takes up in his art-critical work *The Return of the Real* published in 1996. Focusing not on cinema, but on contemporary, neo-avant-garde visual artistic practice and implicating complex perspectival and psychoanalytic theory, Foster argues that the traditional codes of visual culture, which aspire "to a *dompte-regard*, a taming of the [object] gaze" (140) and which function to "screen" and "protect" the viewer from too close an encounter with the traumatic real in the Lacanian sense of the term, have come under radical attack in some recent artists' "defiance of visual sublimation" (161). In taking up neo-avant-garde artists from the 1980's and 90's—most provocative among them being Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, and Robert Gober—Foster argues that in expunging the "last vestiges of the old order of idealist composition" and by pushing "deidealization […] to the point of desublimination," some recent art flaunts established visual practice and "refuses to pacify the gaze, to unite the imaginary and the symbolic against the real" (127, 140). "*It is as if this art,*" Foster says, "*wanted the gaze to shine,* […] *the real to exist, in all the* *glory (or the horror) of its pulsatile desire* […]. To this end […such art] moves […] to tear at the screen" (italics Foster's 140-41). In Foster's view, then, the impulse of the most audacious and troubling artists of our time is not merely to poke through the symbolic or the illusionist screen of proper representation shielding us from the real, but much more devastatingly, the impulse is to pursue the screen's radical collapse in order traumatically "to evoke the real as such" (152). This, Foster says, "is the primary realm of [contemporary] abject art [or what he alternatively calls "traumatic realism"] which is drawn to the broken boundaries of the violated body," and which is "driven by an ambition […] to possess the obscene vitality of the wound *and* [even] to occupy the radical nihility of the corpse" (152, 166).

Foster aims in *The Return of the Real* not only to elucidate contemporary traumatic realism or the postmodern visual "cult of abjection" (166), but also to explore the relation between the historical avant-garde of the 1910's and 20's and the post-war neo-avant-garde of the later part of the twentieth century. Although Foster has much to say about this relationship, I am most interested in his comment that the earlier movement did not manage to become "fully significant" in the way that the present movement actually is. The historical avant-garde failed fully to signify or register (essentially it failed to find an audience), writes Foster, because it was "traumatic—a hole in the symbolic order of its time that […was] not prepared for it" (29). The neo-avant-garde, Foster furthermore suggests, "*act*[s] on the historical avant-garde in ways that we can only now appreciate" (4). "[R]*ather than cancel the project of the historical avant-garde, the neo-avant-garde* [comprehends and]*enacts its project for the first time*" (20). Essentially, what Foster is alluding to I think in comments like the ones above is the growing receptivity to traumatic representation, a change in the social, or what Mark Seltzer calls a new, collective "traumatic *yielding*" to displays of wounded bodies and troubled psyches ("WC" 12). As we saw certainly with Cornelius's and von Busack's critical responses to *Secretary*, we no longer want the object gaze pacified—the real tamed, sublimated, screened, or romanticized—rather, we want it opened up and probed, as Foster would say, in all of its "glory" and "horror." This fixation on the wound ("this fascination with trauma, this envy of abjection today" [Foster 166]) is the result, Foster says, of a "symbolic order in crisis," beset by "the persistent AIDS crisis, invasive disease and death, systemic poverty and crime" to the extent that "for many in contemporary culture truth [today] resides in the traumatic or abject subject, in the diseased or damaged body" (166).

Photographer Cindy Sherman (who Foster sees as producing pictures "in the service of the real" and "without a screen for protection" [150, 149]), and photographer/ music-videographer Floria Sigismondi (who has not yet widely been taken up by the academy) are two such artists for whom truth resides in the wound. I would like briefly to discuss these two women artist (rather than other "traumatic realists" like Richard Prince or Robert Gober) because to my mind they express on a photographic, visual level in some ways what the primary writers of study in this thesis (especially Acker) articulate textually and linguistically.

Cindy Sherman is a much-discussed American conceptual photographer whose film stills appear in galleries everywhere from the *Astrup Fearnly Museet for Moderne Kunst* in Norway, for instance, to the *Guggenheim* to the *Metropolitan Museum of Art* to the *Art Gallery of New South Wales* to the *Tate Gallery* to name just a few locations where Sherman's art is exhibited. Although Sherman's photographic oeuvre spans the 1970's through the 1990's, I am most interested in her middle and late works, specifically in her "Disaster" series of the late 1980's and in her "Sex" or "Mannequin Pictures" of the 1990's. In these middle and late photographs, Sherman moves from presenting intact, stereotypically feminine subjects (her 1970's self-portraits depict such subjects) to presenting bodies behind masks, dead bodies, mannequins twisted and broken into parts, medical-supply-house doll sections in grotesque and distorted configurations, and abject things like vomit, menstrual blood, swollen genitalia, and feces. The trajectory of Sherman's work toward the real horror behind the less disturbing fiction—distinctly toward the abject, dismembered, or obscene body—bespeaks Sherman's growing artistic extremism and fixation on the body's wounds or "intimate apocalypses." [9]

Numerous visual art critics—Hal Foster as well as Laura Mulvey, Lauren O'Neill-Butler, and Steven Shaviro—in fact use the notion of the wound to explain Sherman's troubling avant-garde, prosthetic doll portraits. Mulvey argues that Sherman's later photographs uncover the real truth in the form of decay, fragmentation, and woundedness by displacing the "veil of femininity to reveal the secret stuff of bodily fluids that the cosmetic is designed to conceal" ("A Phantasmagoria" 14). Drawing upon Mulvey's work, Lauren O'Neill-Butler more explicitly links Sherman to the wound, writing that "Sherman's move to the unintelligible, exploded subject represents woman as the disintegrated wound, and even woman as 'lack'" (*FirstVerse*, http://www.tenverses). In Sherman's pictures of "disasters" and doll parts, "of the body turned inside out, […] literally abjected, thrown out," Foster, however, locates the wound not only in Sherman's visual representations themselves, but in fact also in the very gaze of the viewer, who becomes, says Foster, "the subject-as-picture," invaded by the horror that is "the object gaze" (149). Steven Shaviro likewise tells us that in his own experience of viewing Sherman's "prosthetic 'self-portraits'" (portraits he describes as "obsessed with mutilation and disease," and as featuring "[c]unts [that] gape open distended with blood and shit, […] limbless trunks testify[ing] to torturous amputations. […] Bloody menstrual wounds, beautiful flowers of passion"), vision "itself is wounded and infected" (*Doom Patrols*, http://www.dhalgren). Sherman's photographs, Shaviro continues, "force their way into the viewer's […] flesh. […] I become what I behold. Subject and object are now utterly indistinguishable" (*Doom*). For Shaviro, this incising of the viewer—this violent phenomenological intertwining of subject and object, self and grotesquely figured and wounded other—is not cause for lamentation; but quite the contrary in fact. He writes: "Let the images penetrate your flesh, and burn into your retinas. Make their vulnerability your own. […] This isn't a critique," he tells us, this is an orgiastic "slide into the depths of abjection" (*Doom*). "Long live the new flesh," he deliriously declares. "This is not 'lack' [as Laura O'Neill-Butler says], but [rather] overfullness, life lived to its greatest intensity" (*Doom*).

Shaviro's response to Sherman's art demonstrates explicitly this opening to the wound, "this envy of abjection today," as Hal Foster calls it. Shaviro's indulgent reflections, in which "I become what I behold," furthermore exemplify the workings of wound culture, what Mark Seltzer describes variously as a failure of distinction between "the singularity […] of the subject […] and collective forms of representation," "a failure of distance with respect to representation," or the "understanding of representations as having the power to wound" ("WC" 4, 13, 12). Shaviro's remarks on Sherman might additionally be seen as illustrating Bataille's notion of *communication* as something that occurs with the sacrifice or wounding of another, and that entails the abandonment of the self or the loss of boundary between self and other. That Shaviro in fact sees a link between Sherman's excessive portraits and Bataillean thought is made clear in Shaviro's final comments on Sherman in *Doom Patrols*, where he alludes tacitly to Bataille's "law" expressed in "The College of Sociology" that we are only connected to one another "through rents and wounds" (Bataille 251), and where he mentions Bataille's book *Madame Edwarda*: "Everything," writes Shaviro, "enters through a gash, a slit, an open sore: the mouth, the eyes, the asshole, the cunt. Think of how Bataille describes Madame Edwarda's cunt, the divine shrine at which he ecstatically worships: 'a live wound, gaping at me, hairy and pink, bursting with life like a repulsive octopus.' Now, there's no turning back. This is not 'lack,' but overfullness" (*Doom*).

As Shaviro implies, Sherman's photographs do not simply emphasize the abject feminine body (or, more graphically, the cunt as he puts it); rather, her pictures undertake a process of resignifiction in which supposed "lack" becomes profusion, and the profane is reformulated into a new, strangely impressive object of plentitude. Like Sherman, the three novelists of this study engage in similar projects wherein abjection is often audaciously proclaimed (rather than disavowed) and the body is violently and "viciously transfigured."[10] In *Suspicious River*, for instance, wherein Kasischke's heroine Leila poeticizes her own abjection and bodily ruin (she sees her own facial bruises as beautiful flowers, "black roses on my cheekbones still swelling" [259]), it is following the most extreme humiliations that Leila escapes what she calls the "void" and is finally "dropped, bloody [...] into the world. [...] born [...into] the world without end" (264-65). Steinke's *Jesus Saves* similarly shows us bodily disaster alongside courage and strength in abjection. Moving inexorably toward the figuration of the corpse, Steinke also suggests how a body can be both drained and transfigured, both "emaciated creature [...]. Smeared with feces and covered with spider bites, [...] strange and shrunken," as well as recreated, seemingly impossibly, into the delicate form of "a wood nymph or a forest fairy" (212). While Kasischke and Steinke share Sherman's preoccupation with the realities of defilement and with the potentialities of abjection (with the strange flowering or beautification of wounds), the most provocative and extensive parallels can be drawn I think between Sherman and Acker.

Although he does not develop the connection, Shaviro implicitly suggests Sherman and Acker's affiliation first by following his chapter on Sherman in *Doom Patrols* with a chapter devoted to masochism in Acker's *My Mother: Demonology*, and second by telling us in his "Preface" to *Doom Patrols* that his "approach to postmodernism" and its products (including Sherman's photographs) "is informed" not only by Bataille, Blanchot, and Deleuze and Guattari, but also by "exemplary postmodern thinkers" like Kathy Acker and William Burroughs, who are, he says, "frequently present" in the pages of *Doom Patrols*. Where Shaviro draws, it seems, upon writers like Acker to appreciate contemporary visual art, Peter Wollen, in his obituary piece on Acker in the *London Review of Books*, traces a different conceptual trajectory explaining the importance of late twentieth century "art world ideas and practices" (specifically the appropriation art of Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, and David Salle) to

Acker's own literary practice ("Death" 9). Although Wollen never mentions Sherman in his article, her work also may have influenced Acker's artistic production, or indeed vice versa. Throughout the 1980's and 90's, where Sherman draws visual attention to feminine abjection, so too does Acker on a literary level—as anyone who has ever read her would affirm—lift the veil on the real, tear at the screen, and thereby compel her readers to confront the body (specifically the feminine body) in its most abject, obscene, and wounded manifestations. From the early work *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978) to her last literary production *Eurydice in the Underworld* (1997), we are assaulted with images (mostly literary but occasionally pictorial as well) of the body's excess, waste, and disease; references to the tabooed or unspeakable—for instance, to pelvic infection or inflammatory disease, to cancerous body parts, to sexual fluids, cunts, and cocks, to "the strangest of excrements," to mothers who wear "menstrual blood on [...their] mouth[s]" (*Pussy* 53, 15)—make up the abject and profane imagistic texture of Acker's novels.

Not only is Acker's imagery akin to Sherman's, but so too is Acker's intent on re-imagining abjection (her intent, I mean, on finding subversion and strength in assumed lack, beauty in vulgarity, or "*a hidden glory*" in "*destruction*," as she puts it in *In Memoriam* [44]) similar to Sherman's project of re-articulating lack as profusion, or "overfullness" as Shaviro says. As we will see in the following chapters, Acker's writing of the repressed and marginal takes many forms. To provide only an introductory example of how Acker both writes the base reality of abjection and manages as well creatively to transform or re-articulate it, consider briefly how she uses vulgarity, specifically the word "cunt" in her novels. While on the one hand, Acker might describe her female protagonists abjectly as dripping, filthy, and bleeding, their cunts "tough, rotted, putrid beef. [...] red ugh" (*Blood* 18), on the other hand, she also imagines them as beautiful and valuable (their "cunts made from the sun and out of rubies" [*Pussy* 35]), as well as powerfully dangerous with "cunts," as St. Barbara from *Pussy, King of the Pirates* says, like "knives in our fists" (35). In Acker's novels, such re-signifying strategies like the one discussed above are linked to a larger project of finding heroism in victimization, and of transforming the pain and trauma of the feminine margins into both a politics and a poetics.

Another shared strategy of Sherman and Acker's is to engage the viewer or reader in such a way that the boundary between the self and the object of artistic contemplation (whether photographic or novelistic) is broken down to the point that the self, invaded by the object gaze, becomes the other in a process that bends, to use Seltzer's language, private self-reference to external event reference. We have seen that both Foster and Shaviro point to the phenomenological intertwining that occurs in Sherman's work. To my knowledge, no commentator on Acker has made a similar observation or discussed how she confronts us with the wound, not from a comfortably screened or distanced position, but in fact from a more disturbing inner intimacy. However, we are asked precisely to see ourselves as wounded other, for instance, in her brief, semi-autobiographical performance piece *Eurydice in the Underworld*, where she not only imagines her own death by cancer but, by naming her dying and then dead protagonist "You," furthermore asks the reader/viewer to see him- or herself in the real of another's death, as a body that inevitably dies. Ultimately, then, as we will see more fully in

Chapter 5, what Acker produces in *Eurydice* is an experience of continuity in relation to death.

Sherman and Acker are not alone in the attention they direct to a wounded sociality that embodies the artist as well as the viewer or reader. Visual artist Floria Sigismondi, "drawn [as Dominique Nahas says] to a Bataillean notion of Surrealistic excess,"[11] also asks her viewers to see abjection and the wound not as residing outside the self, but much more closely within. Although her photographs have been exhibited in many locations including at the *John Gibson Gallery* alongside Cindy Sherman's pictures in Soho, New York in a 2000 group showing called "Bizarre," Sigismondi is in fact best known for the often disturbing and contentious music videos she has directed for artists like Marilyn Manson, Björk, and Leonard Cohen, among many other musicians. Most shocking and memorable among her video shoots is the 1996 Manson video *The Beautiful People*. This gruesome video, which in fact was shown extensively on American *MTV*, produces a gothic and carnivalesque antiaestheticism, featuring the body in pain—bound, stretched, and seemingly disarticulated with grotesque oral devices.

In addition to her troubling videos, Sigismondi has produced a volume of her photographic work called *Redemption* (published in 1998) featuring over 150 of her photographs, many of which were taken on her music video sets. Viewing the pictures in *Redemption* is a harrowing experience: images of the body disfigured, tortured, drowning, confined, diseased, decomposing, made into medical museum specimens, and abandoned in decrepit insane asylums and other "noir" locales, assault us page after page. *Redemption*'s themes clearly are the body in pain and the self socially repudiated. That

Sigismondi includes in *Redemption* various self-portraits (one in which she features herself as a dismembered mannequin or a Shermanesque doll in parts) suggests that Sigismondi too is a vulnerably wounded and forsaken body, but one belonging nevertheless, as Acker might say, to an alternative "tribe" of the dispossessed. Like Acker's texts, including *Eurydice* and others, which articulate marginal experience often from a self-referential point of view, Sigismondi's pictures call into question, then, both the conventional distinction between the artist and the object of view as well as the illusion that aberration or otherness lies elsewhere. Underscoring her theme of phenomenological entanglement, bringing the viewer into this engagement, and gesturing simultaneously toward the Baudelairean way in which "charms" may be found in "most repugnant objects"[12] are various textual passages within *Redemption* including the line, "abnormality is in the eye of the beholder" (10), as well as the book's concluding assertion: "I am the creature / the angry / the beast / the beauty / the ugly / the love / the end / I am / what you are" (159). That Sigismondi, like some of the other artists and filmmakers discussed in this introduction, is a hopeful (and not necessarily despondent) cartographer of the wound is perhaps best revealed in her own comment that her focus is not just the "carnage of the body," but, more optimistically, also what the body "acquires […] in turn" when it "has been traumatized."[13]

In the above pages I have tried to limit my discussion to a survey of the most provocative and, for me, memorable instances of wound culture as they have appeared recently in popular to high art, in alternative music to conceptual photography. The works I have selected as evidencing our contemporary fixation on trauma and the wound constitute necessarily an exclusionary account of those artists, filmmakers, theorists, writers, musicians, or personal body modifiers for whom "truth resides in the wound." It is difficult not to notice further phenomena and new cultural productions staging the body "insistently […] as spectacle […] of crisis, disaster, or atrocity," and revealing "sociality and the wound […as] inseparable" (Seltzer, *SK* 35, 275). For instance, in a recent issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* writer Carl Elliott describes a growing phenomenon called *apotemnophilia*, in which healthy people conceptualize themselves as wounded and seek elective amputations. "For the first time that I am aware of," Elliott writes, "we are seeing clusters of people seeking voluntary amputations of healthy limbs and performing amputations on themselves" (73).[14] In a different context, a recent music video called *Cocoon*, directed by Eiko Ishioka in 2002 and featuring the avant-garde pop singer Björk, also seems to me to produce and perpetuate wound culture. In the video, which is banned from broadcast on American *MTV* but which circulates freely nonetheless on the Internet, Björk is naked and streaming something that looks ambiguously like blood or red ribbon from her nipples. As the video unfolds, the substance from her breasts shrouds and mummifies (or cocoons) her whole body transforming it from an erotic presence into a disturbing absence. Striking about Björk's video is not only its strange serenity, but also its easy blend of eros and thanatos, its performance of the wounded or disappearing body not as site of pain, but rather as site of easeful pleasure and death.

Catherine Hardwicke's movie *Thirteen*, released in 2003, is also fundamentally about woundedness. Briefly, the wound as the locus of the subject and as providing the basis of at least a minimal sociality is *Thirteen*'s main theme. *Thirteen* is based on a semi-autobiographical script co-written by Hardwicke and a young girl named Nikki Reed, who debuts in the movie as a troubled teen named Evie. The film is about female delinquency and depicts two teenaged girls united in a libidinally-charged friendship by increasingly ruinous signs of the wound—by acts of self-destruction including drug use, body piercing, self-cutting, promiscuity, and games of sadomasochistic violence, which entail beating each other unconscious for kicks and ironically to feel something. Noteworthy about *Thirteen* is not only the film's gritty autobiographical realism, but also its attempt to explore the sociocultural context that inspires this kind of bad "grrrl" waywardness. What the film uncovers is a social order in ruin driven by an increasingly pornographic consumer culture, and populated by uncaring or abusive fathers and by mothers brutalizing themselves with plastic surgery, booze, and co-dependent relationships with junkies. While this film is generous and uninhibited in its exploration of teenage excessiveness and dereliction, by no means is *Thirteen* hedonistic in prescription. Quite the contrary in fact, the movie unfolds as a tale cautioning against wasting oneself and ends essentially conventionally with the central teenage heroine restored to her familial place and seemingly to proper (or good girl) subjectivity.

Part 3: Feminism and the Wound

Wound culture clearly shows no signs of abating. From actual cuts in the body (including piercings, brandings, or even limb-amputating practices) to a proliferation of artistic representations of the wound (including everything from Trent Reznor's alternative musical poetics of self-annihilation to Cindy Sherman's portraits of the body abjected in parts to Fincher's theatre of Artaudian cruelty to Hardwicke's cinematic exploration of teenage wantonness and self-ruin)—these are the multitudinous things, then, that make up and in some ways routinize wound culture today. While my survey of the cultural field at large confirms Mark Seltzer's notion that we are fixated on an "endlessly reproducible display [...] of wounded bodies and wounded minds in public" (WC" 3), it also I think problematizes Seltzer's use of the term "pathological" (his language of disease and "contagion") in relation to such a display. By no means, in other words, do all of the producers or theorists of wound culture considered in this introduction present the wound (or the sociality that emerges bound to it) as pathological or even necessarily problematic. As we have seen, representations of (and responses to) the wound and its "contagion"—its "spreading outward from the wounded individual to a [...] 'collective-subjective'" (Seltzer, *SK* 275)—have been mournful and apprehensive (as is the case in films like *Requiem for a Dream* and *Thirteen*), as certainly as they have been hopeful, celebratory, and even edged sometimes with *jouissance* (as is the case, for example, in Cronenberg's *Crash* and in Steven Shaviro's rapt assertions of "Long live the new flesh").

This tension or ambivalence about abjection, sadomasochism, trauma, or the wound comes to the fore in feminist debate, in writing by women, who, more than men, as Julia Kristeva has perhaps best shown us,[15] have a greater stake in questions of abjection. While some recent art and cultural critics like Linda S. Kauffman and Amelia Jones applaud the turn to abjection in art (the turn, as Kauffman says, to an "antiaesthetic" in art, film, performance, and writing that "expose[s] the inside of the body […and] plumbs the lower depths" [8], or to "body art," as Jones says, that both "insistently pose[s] the subject as" other and underscores "the inexorability of our embodiment, of the body as meat" [10, 18]), other writers like Anita Phillips and Karmen MacKendrick provide pro-arguments for actual sadomasochist practice. In *A Defense of Masochism*, Phillips aims to "open a space for […a] more positive interpretation of masochism," arguing that actual "sexual pain" can be "psychologically healing," and that both masochistic practice and textuality show us "suffering turned into triumph," "oppression" rewritten "as pleasure," and "unfeeling" transformed into radical "sensation" (3, 37, 65, 63). Phillips also argues that an affirmative view of female masochism allows for "a widening [rather than a constricting] of women's sexual possibilities" (53). She speaks additionally of masochism as "self-shattering" and predicated on death, and corresponding implies, I think, that masochism gives us a necessary syntax of mourning, in which we can "glimpse," enact, and more fully explore our relationship with death (156).

Offering a more philosophically sophisticated look at submission and domination, Karmen MacKendrick's recent book *Counterpleasures* also takes a positive stance on what she calls the emancipating and subject breaking "counterpleasures" (predominantly s / m practices) of our time. There is much, she asserts, that "I have found good in such practice" (91). MacKendrick situates her work not only in theories of pleasure, but also in what she calls "the tradition of disruption," citing both Bataille (who "foremost" among philosophers, says MacKendrick, understands "the pleasures of excess") and Blanchot (who "understands the seductiveness of death") as major influences on her own work (2, 4, 5). She traces an affinity between ascetic and sadomasochistic practices of the body, stating that her interest lies in pleasures that defy sense or "queer our notion of pleasure," in the "connection of pleasure to political subversion," and in "the transgressive possibilities of perverse delights" (17, 5, 13). Counterpleasures, MacKendrick writes, defy "one's own survival, promising the death not of the body but, for an impossible moment, of the subject [...]. They are pleasures that twist our conception of subjectivity, defying and even denying the subject" (19). Counter-pleasures, she furthermore contends, are "unwise," "dangerous," "incautious and unproductive," and, as such, they allow us to "forget limit" and "find joy" (150-51).

In her discussion specifically of s / m practice, MacKendrick stresses consent as "a vital starting point," arguing ultimately that s / m (especially "new leather")[16] allows for a politically important "destabilizing of identity," in which practitioners take part in a "fluid" rather than rigidly "hierarchized" community of "switching" submissives and dominants, of variously role-playing tops and bottoms (94, 97-98). In s / m practice, MacKendrick finds in fact nothing less than an "alternative image of love," in which both the masochist and the sadist experience "communication," in the Bataillean sense of the term, "*disruption* of differentiation. [...] subjectivity come undone," a laceration, in other words, in the subject's sense of separate selfhood (117). Through "strategic restraint and pain" and through the giving over of control, MacKendrick argues, the masochist breaks with subjectivity while simultaneously discovering ("[a]gainst all appearances") a space for resistance, in which pleasure is "taken in the body's strength" and ability to withstand violation (110, 102). Provocatively, then, MacKendrick sees masochism or "bottoming" as providing not exactly an experience of humiliation as we might imagine, but rather what she calls "m-powerment"—"a joyful triumph of the body," "a sense of power as *strength*," as well as "a possibility beyond subjectivity" (102, 103, 119). The top or sadist, she argues also, in coming "into contact" with the masochist's high, experiences "an increase in power," but more to the point, "an increase in power that overflows the boundaries of subjectivity" (130). As she puts it differently, the top or dominant breaks subjectivity or exceeds discontinuity by extending "mastery beyond the limit of [...his or her] own subjectivity" (134). The sadist's self-extension implies a paradoxical laceration or loss and can be imagined, says MacKendrick, in the positive terms of "the gift" ("the joy of topping," she writes, "is the joy of the pure gift") given in the insurgent spirit of potlatch and requiring an excessive expenditure of power ("an extravagant outpouring of energy") that at once signals "gain" and "triumphant annihilation" (133).

Although MacKendrick situates herself theoretically in the French tradition of Bataille, Blanchot, Jean-Luc Nancy and others, I view her work as not just philosophically elucidating present day wound culture, but in fact as providing another instance of it. In other words, far from being a disinterested reflection upon contemporary s / m practice, *Counterpleasures*, in its own right as a cultural production, is as an *instantiation* of how we have become fixated upon and even enamoured by signs of the wound. I write this not only because of the positive stance *Counterpleasures* takes, but also on account of the book's own aesthetic or "look," which is clearly in service to the wound. This aesthetic is manifest in things like the book's jacket cover featuring Saint Sebastian's pierced body, MacKendrick's dedication "with gratitude and affection" to the memory of masochistic performance artist Bob Flanagan, her "acknowledgement" of her own work's wounds or "flaws" (xi), her inclusion of epigraphs poeticizing pain (like the Blanchot one opening *Counterpleasures* about how "The quick of life would be the burn of the wound"), as well as her own stylistic flourishes like the most provocative one of her final chapter's title, "unspeakable pleasures *love is a series of scars*." "[*L*]*ove is a series of scars*"—or as Acker closely writes, "Wounds are the signs of my love" [*In Memoriam* 50]—this is wound culture not only philosophized but produced and poeticized.

Where some writers like Phillips and MacKendrick embrace the wound in the form of s / m practice (and can be seen as advancing what MacKendrick calls "'bad girl' feminism" [16]), other writers like Jessica Benjamin force us to situate the discussion in the context of a more suspicious opposition to such practice.[17] Like MacKendrick, Benjamin claims that, "erotic domination, for both sides, draws its appeal in part from its offer to break the encasement of the isolated self" (*The Bonds of Love* 83). Benjamin argues, however, that this promise is never fulfilled in sadomasochism, which she in fact ultimately sees as more firmly establishing subject boundaries and gender polarity. Based on the psychoanalytic premise that oedipalization is a process in which boys become subjects by repudiating (sadistically) the maternal or feminine role and in which girls identify (masochistically) with the "lack of subjectivity" of "the self-sacrificing mother," Benjamin's argument essentially is that s / m violently reconfirms sexual difference, showing us where Oedipus, so to speak, has left his mark. "Inflicting pain," Benjamin writes, "is the [male] master's way of maintaining his separate identity" at the incredible expense of the female slave or masochist, who "increasingly feels that she does not exist" (62, 65). Benjamin contends that what is necessary between erotic partners is the mutual *recognition* of one another's separate subjectivity (what she calls an intersubjective "awareness of the separate other"), rather than a structure that aggrandizes one partner at the other's expense, and that leads (as in *The Story of O*, says Benjamin) not only to the "breakdown of essential tension," but irrevocably also "towards death," toward the death of the subjugated other (30, 53, 65).

Not surprisingly, this kind of critique of gender relations that place women in positions of nullity, abjection, and death is made by other feminists, notably the French feminists Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. While Cixous is perhaps best known for her call for a new libidinal economy of loss or dissolution of the subject and also for a corresponding *écriture féminine* (or form of writing, as she says, "that tears me apart" and is produced, in the space, it seems, of the scar, with "loss [...and] expense"), she is also highly critical in "Sorties" of the historico-philosophical association of women and death ("Sorties" 86). Philosophy and literature, she laments, "are constructed on the premise of woman's abasement," on hierarchical opposition in which women are devalued and debased, and in which "Death is [...] at work" (65). She speaks angrily of literary history as a vast "procession of mistreated, [...] devastated, patient women, dolls, cattle, cash" (75). She looks to a future when women might "wake up from among the dead" (65). "I cannot," she tells us, "inhabit a victim, no matter how noble. I resist: detest a certain passivity, it promises death for me. [...] I want to meet women [in literature] who love themselves, who are alive, who are not debased [...] wiped out. [...] So, urgently and anxiously, I look for a scene in which a type of exchange would be produced that [...] wouldn't be in collusion with the old story of death" (77-78). Irigaray also writes against what she views as a Western sacrificial economy, in which the woman "must be sacrificed [...] must disappear. [...] efface herself" ("Love Between" 169). Like both Benjamin and Cixous, Irigaray aims to find a way out of the dialectic of master and slave, which she sees as existing chiefly "between the sexes" and as demanding death, oppressing "the feminine by giving [...women] death as [...their] only horizon" ("Love" 171).

Another differently provocative voice in the feminist debate comes more recently from Juliet Flower MacCannell, who, in her book *The Hysteric's Guide to the Future Female Subject*, questions women's relationship to Sadean desire or to what she alternatively calls the sadistic or obscene superego, which she says is related to the death drive and "promises fulfillment" in the form of "lethal *jouissance*"—in the form of "unlimited total *jouissance*" (11, xiv). For MacCannell, the issue is neither the persistence in sexual relations of a master / slave dialectic, nor the way in which women are effaced in a sacrificial economy and, hence, symbolically associated with the wound. Rather, MacCannell's concern is the "ever-expanding obscenity in our lives," "the sadism roaming at large in the land today," or what she likewise describes as the burden of Sade's "unstated legacy," which has been, she claims, not exactly to enslave the girl, but instead to allure her with "an elaborate call to freedom"—to freedom unchecked, unreserved, outside prohibition and the law (xv-xvi, 10, xiii, xiv). While MacCannell credits Sade for challenging "singularly the right to existence of a feminine subject in the name of absolute sexual equality," she finds "something not [quite] right," something in fact deeply disturbing about a sadistic ethics denouncing the social (disclaiming "all symbolic seeming" and care for the other) in favor of a "perverse" call to absolute personal freedom—"in favor of the Real: *jouissance*, death drive, the beyond of sex" (xiii, xiv, 30). The "thing" ("*das ding*"), says MacCannell, with which the girl today must contend is not the mother (as traditional psychoanalysis too casually assumes), but rather the pervert or sadist, who "tempts the girl away from assuming a social place [...] away from becoming a woman" (xiii). Sade, MacCannell clarifies, "is woman's internal alien today" (xiii).

Although fearful of "a dramatically expanded excess—Sade's excess—at large in the world" today, among MacCannell's chief assertions is that we stand in need of writers willing in fact to risk everything and go "all the way with the obscene Thing," face Sade squarely, withstand his inducements, and importantly come "back to teach us [...about de Sade's] appeal" presumably so that we might resist (34, xvii). MacCannell writes: "Art in our time has [...] to go beyond certain limits in order to re-mark again the limits of the human, to refind what of the human remains after certain limits have been surpassed" (11). She anticipates anxiously, furthermore, the literary appearance of "this impossible character who can find a way through" today's "foul sty," find a way out of Sade's bedroom without being forced to resume an outmoded "patriarchal femininity" (34, 31, 32).[18]

As the above pages attest, feminist thought itself evidences great anxiety and ambivalence regarding women's relationship to the wound and to sadomasochist socio-sexual structures. While both contemporary popular and avant-garde representation often idealizes, eroticizes, or poeticizes the wound, the cut, or the possibility of dying with scars, for women this embrace of abjection is not unproblematic given their socio-historical repression and victimization, given their prescribed sacrificial role in culture.

Put another way, because historically the sacrificial body of choice has been (and continues to be) a feminine one,[19] many women may find themselves in a troubling position regarding wound culture today. As a conclusion to this chapter, I briefly consider the question of Kasischke's, Steinke's, and Acker's stance on all of this—the question of how they negotiate the feminist problematic in relation to the wound.

While I see Kasischke, Steinke, and Acker decidedly as feminist writers, I remain mindful that each of them might easily inspire feminist criticism over their often horrific presentations of brutalized girls and women—over their novelist parades or "processions" (to use Cixous's term) of wounded women on the verge of dying, bent, it seems, on subject-breaking lethal *jouissance*. In their willingness to let their female protagonists go all the way with the "obscene Thing" (and, in fact, sometimes never return from the encounter), the novelists of study in this thesis in varying degrees contribute to and produce "bad-girl" feminist thought.[20] Exploring the principle of loss in women's psyches and lives, each novelist writes in some way within the Bataillean tradition of heterology and excess. In *Suspicious River*, Kasischke's assent to loss and to female masochism can be detected in two primarily places: in the novel's stunning linguistic beauty and poetic excess, and in the book's conclusion, where it is only by going through pain and wounding that the protagonist Leila can be knocked, it seems, back into life and into the possibility of a triumphant and loving female sociality. Where *Suspicious River* poeticizes and takes us to the verge of death, Steinke's child abduction story pulls us further to "the thing" by bringing the girl heroine not just face to face with death, but right to the absolute loss of death, literally without return. Disturbingly, *Jesus Saves* moves ultimately toward bringing together the girl and the figuration of the corpse; however, the narrative also attempts to get beyond victimization by transforming a state of pain into a space of strength, solidarity, and heroism. While Steinke by no means supports violence against girls or women, she does try to discover in the most horrible situation empowerment, a transgressive subjectivity in femininity.

Among perhaps the "baddest" of "bad girl" feminists, Acker produces literature more extreme than either Kasischke or Steinke. I mentioned earlier the emphasis Acker places upon female bodily abjection: with her insistent references to menstrual blood, pelvic infection, "the strangest of excrements [...] stench [...and] pungent sweat" (*Pussy* 53), Acker refuses unequivocally to withdraw the body in all of its disease, discomfort, and obscenity. She refuses to repress or to idealize female bodily reality, and aims instead through explicit exposure to "plumb the lower depths." Ultimately, Acker's fixation upon abjection leads her in books like *Demonology* and *Eurydice* to the limit of death, to its most intimate unveiling. Her project, in other words, is not seemingly to break with the "obscene Thing" ("that thing," MacCannell says, "that is the death drive" [20]), but rather to symbolize her own (and our) traumatically inevitable relationship with death, and thereby to find language in the face of the inexpressible. Like MacKendrick, Acker furthermore takes, as we shall see, a radical stance on masochism, envisioning it complexly as a paradoxical means of "m-powerment" (in which, by withstanding and going through pain, the subject might emerge stronger and "more beautiful than before" [*Dem* 112]), as an ethical outlook that "cut[s] through [...] autism" or solipsism by opening the self to the other (*In Mem* 5), and also as a subversive form of authorship itself (in which the homogeneity of a single authorial presence is broken by a radical intertextuality or multiplicity of voices signaling a new textual heterogeneity). While the later chapters on Acker explore more fully her textualization of female masochism, it is important to note that she has links also with de Sadean forms of excess in that her female protagonists seek, I quote MacCannell, the "beyond of sex," practicing forms of eroticism outside the limits of the law in service to "an elaborate call to freedom." Refusing to circumscribe their enjoyment of their bodies, Acker's heroines promiscuously "fuck whenever," as Capital from *In Memoriam* says, "every man [and sometimes all the girls] in sight" (175, 154). They furthermore resist growing up, resist assuming a conventional social place or becoming women in the sense at least that they never settle down, prefer to wander, to experience the world in wonder, have abortions, take off for parts unknown, and perpetually disavow the dominant social order.

Having argued that Acker, Kasischke, and Steinke produce different extremes of "bad girl" feminist literature in service largely to the wound, there are ways nonetheless that they each write from a position of ambivalence, with a dialectical eye, in fact, on the sadomasochism at large in the land today. Kasischke's *Suspicious River* and Steinke's *Jesus Saves* both offer sensitive accounts of women's attraction to death or to lethal *jouissance*; they both respectfully address the question of why women might put themselves literally at grave risk. Without moralizing, they show us female subjects oriented toward death, living dangerously with death in clear view. While Kasischke goes so far as to poeticize her heroine's nihilist, masochistic stance, neither she nor Steinke is uncritical of the sociocultural context that leads women in quest of wounding. Part of my aim in the following two chapters, then, is to consider the wary eye both writers cast on violence against women, on violence enacted repeatedly (or systematically) on the female body by unsavory men (trolls, creeps, pervs) all too willing to inflict the wound more ardently. For all of her transgressive extremism, Acker too casts a harsh light on a seemingly ample source of vicious male power uses. From the pimps and "freaks" at *Fun City* strip club in *In Memoriam* to the twisted fathers and perverse presidents of *Demonology*, Acker is highly critical of men's use and abuse of girls and women. Intent on exposing brutes and bullies from the familial to the presidential, Acker also aims to free the girl from their hostile grasp. Juliet Flower MacCannell and others[21] might certainly count Acker among the many female writer "enthusiasts of Sade [...] today" (xvii). Like Sade, Acker shows us a form of female sexuality radically disdainful of limits. And yet, I am not entirely comfortable with seeing her strictly as a Sadean woman writer. The reasons for this are threefold: first, because in showing us the pain and trauma of abuse from the victim's perspective (from the perspective of the wounded) she steps away from Sade, and does in this respect remark the limits, as MacCannell might say, between "the human and the Thing." Second, in her fictions Acker takes us sometimes entirely away from horror and into other spaces of wonder. This is something Sade never does—he never journeys into wonder. The third thing I see as distinguishing Acker from Sade is that whereas Sade is normally associated with the denial of the maternal body,[22] Acker, without claiming any reproductive functioning for her heroines, traces (as we will see most abundantly in *My Mother: Demonology*) a symbolic return to the mother.

In the remainder of this thesis, I try to read each work under study on its own terms, while simultaneously locating each text in wound culture. I try also to take into account the contradictions that may emerge in feminist productions exploring the contentious subjects of sadomasochism and the death drive in women's lives. Beginning with Kasischke and ending with Acker, as this thesis unfolds the literature becomes in many ways more extreme, more limit-breaking as well as more aesthetically preoccupied and experimental. The increasing experimentalism from Kasischke to Steinke to Acker suggests that as we push the body or probe the wound further, we require an attendant rupture of language, an attendant tear in the very act of literary description itself. I begin, then, with Kasischke's *Suspicious River*, a realist novel bringing us to a death without dying, and move toward Acker's *Eurydice in the Underworld*, an innovative performance piece stepping amply over death's edge, and showing us what impossible pleasures, what community might be found in irrevocable loss.

Notes

1. In her book, *The Hysteric's Guide to the Future Female Subject*, Juliet Flower MacCannell uses the phrase "obscene Thing" to describe the internal horror with which we all contend. She associates this "obscene" or "inhuman Thing" variously with the real, the death drive, and also with sadistic desire. In both her "Introduction" to the book and her first chapter entitled, "The Soul of Woman under Sadism," MacCannell furthermore speaks of the "obscene Thing" in relation to what she calls the sadistic superego. She argues that today we are governed by "the now id-like character of the superego," which directs us toward transgressive sadomasochistic excess, perversion, and even toward "radical evil" (9, 8). See Part 3 of this introduction for further discussion of MacCannell.

2. Directing our attention to "the carnival of carnage, the unthinkable and unspeakable horrors to which we are daily exposed, and to which we are growing increasingly numb," MacCannell makes the point that we are living in a sadistic age of escalating violence. She questions in particular "how well the girl handles the bundle of obscenity that has landed, so to speak, in her lap" (24).

3. In his book-cover recommendation of Steinke's second novel, *Suicide Blonde*, Robert Olmstead says that the narrative is written "in the tradition of Djuna Barnes, George Bataille, and Marguerite Duras. It's about life on the edge" (as qtd. in *Suicide Blonde*). Acker's association with Bataille is more direct in that she not only makes him a literary character in *My Mother: Demonology*, but in fact mentions him various times in her essays collected in *Bodies of Work*. See specifically the essay "Critical Languages," where Acker credits Bataille (and other members of the group Acéphale) for trying to return to the body and to the knowledge that the "body is limited [...subject] to death" (90). See also the essay "A Few Notes on Two of My Books," where Acker states her allegiance with what she calls "'the black tradition'" of Sade, Genet, and William Burroughs among others (6).

4. I use the phrase "lethal *jouissance*" to refer to forms of pleasure that disrupt subjectivity, and that paradoxically imply self-loss, violence, and the death drive. Juliet Flower MacCannell uses the phrase similarly, but suggests additionally something more malignant, more evil at work in lethal *jouissance*. See the "Introduction" and first chapter of *The Hysteric's Guide* for further discussion.

5. Fashions by *Channel* and *Dolce & Gabanna* (and others) appear in the 28th edition of *Big* magazine, printed in Spain in 2000 and dedicated to horror and the reality of death. This 28th issue of the magazine, produced, as the credit page attests, in the skull and cross bones spirit of "memento mori," is most unexpectedly gruesome with its violent fashion model photos of victimization, vampirism, and bodily mutilation.

6. The Sex Pistols are famous for their nihilist call for "Anarchy in the UK," and The Doors for their limit-shattering call to "break on through to the other side," to reach

"the end, beautiful friend […] the end of everything that stands […] of […] lies, […] of nights we tried to die" (see the songs "Break on Through" and "The End"). Both Nirvana's Kurt Colbain and Hole's Courtney Love differently confront us with excess and extremist art. Colbain, who like Jim Morrison drug overdosed at 27, wrote lyrics about being drained and homeless in songs like "Something in the Way," and also about being kidnapped, tortured, and raped in songs like "Polly." Courtney Love, like Kathy Acker in many ways, gives voice to "everyone [who] is hurt," as Love puts it in her 1995 song "Drown Soda." Writing lyrics about being "the girl you know so sick" ("Miss World"), about being the girl who "can only cower [because] you have all the power" ("Softer. Softest"), and about being broken into "doll parts" ("Doll Parts"), Love's focus largely is feminine degradation.

7. In her recent book, *New Millennial Sexstyles*, Carol Siegel produces a chapter (entitled "*Closer* to Gender Dissolution") in avowed celebration of Trent Reznor's masochistic self-production. Siegel speaks of Reznor's "enthusiastic embrace of abjection," which she sees in songs "Head Like a Hole" and "Ringfiner" and in videos like *Closer* and *Happiness in Slavery* (125). She notes that because Reznor's "abjection is […] posited as his only possible speaking position," his "self-presentation challenges [thereby] the border between abjection and subjectivity" (129). Speaking of the "explosion of gender difference into illegibility," what Siegel finds most "[h]opeful" about Reznor's alternative masochistic aesthetic is its "resistance to conventional gender roles"—its challenge to the gendering of masochism as inescapably feminine (113, 120).

8. Although I place *Fight Club* chiefly in the disruptive Bataillean tradition of community engendered through sacrifice, Antonin Artaud also comes to mind in relation to the film's violent ethos. Artaud's call for a form of theatre that will offer "violent gratification […] pushed to the limit" ("Theatre of Cruelty" 64) and that "will appeal to the whole man, not social man submissive to the law" ("The Theatre of Cruelty: *Second Manifesto*" 94) is answered in many ways in *Fight Club*'s vision of a virulent, violent form of masculinity radically disregardful of symbolic law.

9. I take the phrase "intimate apocalypses" from Helen Papagiannis's web site on Cindy Sherman, where she argues that in Sherman's work, "Media images of the cultivated body are denied and replaced with images of the assaulted and fragmented body." See "Cindy Sherman's Masquerade" at http://citd.scar.utoronto.ca.

10. I take this phrase from Arthur F. Redding's work on masochism in Acker's texts (see page 282 of "Bruises, Roses: Masochism and the Writing of Kathy Acker"). In his piece, Redding argues that in Acker's work, masochism marks an "effort to claim and reformulate […] pain" (284). He also speaks of how Acker seeks, in narratives like *Empire of the Senseless*, to transform "bodily violation into an object of beauty" (285). And he comments additionally that in *Blood and Guts in High School*, "self-destruction is […] bound up with a utopian […] desire for a radical transformation" (285).

11. See Nahas's brief article, "Art in America" at http://www.findarticles.com.

12. See line 14 of Charles Baudelaire's poem "Au lecteur" in *The Flowers of Evil.*

13. Sigismondi makes this statement in a web cite interview with Marta Massaioli called "Images in movement." See http://www.floriasigismondi.com.

14. In his piece in *The Atlantic*, Elliott characterizes American culture as an extreme body modification culture, and proposes a cross-over between healthy people who want amputations "and those who seek piercing, scarring, branding, genital mutilation and such" (76). He mentions as well an Internet listserv community (essentially a sociality of the wound) called "amputee-by choice" composed of "devotees," wannabes," and "pretenders" (composed of those who eroticize the amputated body and of those who envy it), whose archived messages speculate "about black-market amputations in Russia," and debate "the merits of industrial accidents, gunshot wounds, self-inflicted gangrene," and other corporeal atrocities (74, 77).

15. In her famous work, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva offers a psychoanalytic discussion on how the subject's entry into the symbolic order (or accession to culture) entails the repudiation of the mother's body. She points to how the social is founded upon the exclusion of the feminine or maternal: the subject's "earliest attempts to release the hold of the *maternal* entity," she writes, is a "struggle, which fashions the human being" and enables collective existence (13). Although Kristeva ultimately I think stresses the importance of the subject's successful entry into the symbolic (otherwise, she says, the subject risks hysteria or psychosis), she nonetheless laments women's sacrificial role in culture and tries, it seems to me, to stake out or uncover a role for the feminine (or what she sometimes calls the "semiotic") in language. More on Kristeva and the semiotic later in Chapter 3, "Poetics of the Periphery."

16. Without pointing to any historical demarcation, MacKendrick distinguishes between "old" and "new leather," arguing that where the latter enforces a rigid division between masters and slaves, the former emphasizes not "the strategic relation," but rather polysexuality and fluidity or "play across gender preferences" (99).

17. MacKendrick provides a good account of the feminist debate over the politics of s / m, and in fact explicitly voices her opposition to Jessica Benjamin, who she sees as overly anxious about the necessity of preserving proper subject status at the expense of experiencing something beyond subjectivity. See *Counterpleasures* pages 93-98 and pages 117-19.

18. By "patriarchal femininity," I take MacCannell to mean a sanitized or desexualized version of the feminine under the protection of the father and uncorrupted essentially by the knowledge Sade put into the world.

19. In her book, *Sacrificed Lives: Kristeva on Women and Violence*, Martha J. Reineke makes this point that historically "women [have been] victimized as members of a group" (3). Reineke argues that "the culture of violence in which women live is most productively understood in terms of a sacrificial economy" driven largely by three "sacrificial [feminine] tropes": the witch, the mystic, and the mother (5, 13).

20. Marilyn Mannners recently designates Acker not exactly a "bad-girl" feminist, but a "dissolute" one. Acker's dissolute writing practice includes, says Manners, "rampant plagiarism of other texts—ranging from formulaic porn to Artaud to Kristeva," the "'dissolute' inscription of pornographic sex scenes," in addition to a radical deconstruction of "'bourgeois linear narrative'" in favor of non-linear, non-teleological narrative ("The Dissolute Feminisms of Kathy Acker" 99, 98).

21. In *The Hysteric's Guide*, MacCannell in fact never mentions Acker, although I suspect that she might denounce her as contributing problematically to de Sadean excess and obscenity. Other recent feminist writers, most notably Nicola Pitchford, explicitly place Acker in a de Sadean inspired pornographic literary tradition, and applaud her feminist intervention in pornographic representation. See Pitchford's essay, "Reading Feminism's Pornography Conflict: Implications for Post-Modern Reading Strategies" and her more recent book, *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in the Novels of Kathy Acker and Angela Carter.*

22. In her reading of Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, MacCannell in fact points to Sade's rejection of the mother in the form of his violent matricidal representations. MacCannell claims that in offering the girl "freedom in the form of an absolute relation to enjoyment," Sade finds it logically necessary to "split […] femininity from maternity," essentially to "'kill' the Mother in the woman […] to end the only real or native limitation on her potentially absolute sexual freedom—procreation" (20, 22-23). In *Coldness and Cruelty*, Gilles Deleuze explains similarly that, "In sadism the Oedipal image of woman is made, as it were, to explode: the mother becomes the victim *par excellence* […]. The ultimate aim of the sadist is to put an effective end to all procreation, since it competes with primary nature" (59-60).

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CHAPTER ONE:

The Lure of Death and the Sadomasochistic in Laura Kasischke's *Suspicious River*

Introduction

Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you.
Leviticus 19:28 as qtd. in Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* 102

As if being were this exploration of all possibility, always going to the extreme, and always hazardous. [...] a full desire for emptiness, there is no end but the definitive emptiness of death [...] what we want is what [...] places our life in danger [...] we are constantly tempted to [...] lose as much as we can [...] we cannot prevent ourselves from struggling toward a destruction.
Bataille, *The History of Eroticism* in *The Accursed Share* 101, 104, 107, 143

All my mother's stories were like this, deeply known to me by heart. So closely printed that when I found a lover for myself, I had the writing in me already [...]. I could have been her [...] I could have been my mother [...] I could be my mother [...] I turned the pages, all I wanted, to look and look [...] a girl with a single thread of blood running down the centre of her white body, where she'd been cut neatly for a seam...There were her parted lips, her palms held upwards, the cut in skin marked...and I was not frightened then. I wanted to look. I loved her, the poor dead woman. I wanted to be that way.
Kirsty Gunn, *The Keepsake* 10-11, 57, 80[1]

Laura Kasischke's debut novel *Suspicious River* exposes the sadomasochism of contemporary American life. Revealing what her protagonist Leila calls "the customs in [...the] bad part of the country," Kasischke directs her narrative attention to sociosexual cultural formations that are unmentionable but nonetheless pervasive, and that work furthermore to turn women into disarticulated, abject, and "splayed" bodies of history (*SR* 205, 129). Kasischke writes the story of Leila Murray, a young married woman turned small-town prostitute who masochistically desires and attempts to perform the emptiness of her own death. *Suspicious River* is one of the most disturbing (and strangely compelling) recent literary texts. It thematizes not only the trauma of sadomasochist gender relations but also the possibility of transformation and change. Yet little critical attention has been paid to Kasischke's work. This chapter seeks to redress the lack in literary commentary and is written out of the conviction that we stand in need of writers like Kasischke who are not afraid to look sadomasochism's lethal appeal squarely in the eye. Writing from the masochist's point of view (from the point of view of a woman who requires pain it seems in order to feel), *Suspicious River* exposes the real and shocks with its increasingly intense *tableaux vivants* of what sexualized violence might actually look like. Kasischke deserves scholarly attention because she speaks to the ways in which the sadomasochism of contemporary life marks us; she addresses the ways in which it can penetrate us to the core. She furthermore tries to step beyond pain and wounding toward new, more positive possibilities for the "future female subject."[2] There is no mistaking the urgency of the issues Kasischke raises: much more than a story of an individual, we can read *Suspicious River* I think as a powerful contemporary allegory of the larger pathological cultural system.

More than just an explicit fiction, then, of female masochist meets male sadist, *Suspicious River* explores the historicity of sadomasochistic trauma, and asks as well what the female masochist might share with the figure of the hysteric and with the abject subject also. In taking up these questions, Kasischke's narrative returns again and again nostalgically to the mother's outlawed (and wounded) body. The provocation of the narrative derives, certainly, from the significant and subversive emphasis it places upon the maternal, but also from the de-idealised version of female sexuality it provides.

Suspicious River, however, is most challenging I think because it poses difficult dilemmas for the feminist reader seeking affirmative narrative models of a resistant, active, and powerful female subjectivity. Most disconcerting is the fact that Kasischke's novel imagines the feminine repeatedly as a site of suffering and of extravagant silence and subjective loss. The text, in fact, poeticizes a young woman's purchase and staging of her own mutilation and death. This *is* a distressing fiction that makes female docility and woundability in some sense desirable through a poetic excess of language. On the other hand, *Suspicious River* also textualizes the uncertain possibility of resisting the victimization offered by inherited gender scripts and sociosexual formations. While Kasischke's novel provides eloquent testimony of the compulsion toward traumatic and self-destructive repetition, change in itself becomes the desired textual trajectory. *Suspicious River* strives ultimately and finally to translate pain and anxiety into expectations of the future—into signifiers of hope. This chapter considers, then, the paradox of the feminine, "docile body," to borrow Foucault's term, as a figure of possible resistance and transformation. It views *Suspicious River* from a combined theoretical and aesthetic perspective, examining the text's psychoanalytic disruptions, its language of negativity, its formal sadomasochistic aesthetic, as well as its utopian transformations. Throughout this chapter I refer to various theorists of trauma (Cathy Caruth), of abjection (Julia Kristeva), of masochistic textuality (Gilles Deleuze), of sadism and hysteria (Juliet Flower MacCannell), and of feminine subjectivity and language (Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray) in order to appreciate fully Kasischke's writing of the wounded feminine subject.

Part 1: Kasischke's Language of the Wound

Written as a stream-of-consciousness first-person testimonial, presented in a series of increasingly frightening *tableaux vivants* (or set pieces), and set in the small-town of Suspicious River, Michigan, Kasischke's novel is a story of unbearable loss that gives voice to the damaged and delegitimized feminine. The novel's narrator and protagonist, twenty-four year old Leila Murray, is vulnerable, wayward, and melancholic: "don't look at me […] I don't matter at all […] always run[ning] in the wrong direction," she tells us (154, 205). Leila's early assertion that, "there are all kinds of people in the world, and they're not all like you," signifies a normative readerly frame of reference which the novel's textual, sexual, and subjective disruptions will undoubtedly unsettle (7). One of the novel's most startling aesthetic (and, given the monological textual form, subjective) disturbances is its pervasively catastrophic language. With an intensely brutalised sensibility, Leila envisions the world as a woundscape of such surreal proportions that when she closes her eyes she envisions bizarre things like attics "full of violent secrets with wet black wings" (114). Even something as innocuous as the rosebuds on the nightgown she wore as a child are remembered direly as "petals of blood" (110). Leila's language is dominated by pain's potentiality, by the repeated figure of the wound: she imagines, for instance, a boy's embrace as "a bracelet of bruises," and sees the entire earth as "a membrane, a blister, filling up fast with […] blood, […forming] the back of a bruise" (200, 105). Leila is poetically sensitive, sophisticated even, and yet she has no social life or meaningful connection to the world. She occupies, to borrow one of Luce Irigaray's terms, a state of *déréliction*, a state of abandonment or marginalization by the larger social order. By the town's other girls and women who "go silent" when she approaches, Leila is considered an aberrant other and has always been rejected and excluded (198). Following her mother's highly eroticized murder, which I discuss below, Leila becomes in addition easy sexual prey for a series of unfeeling and unloving boys and men. She recounts being seduced by high-school boys with whom she performs a self-negating absence ("I just [...] closed my eyes, as if I weren't there at all," recalls Leila); she speaks also of being used salaciously by teachers in parking lots, raped by gold-toothed, paedophiliac mechanics in the woods ("Where's your daddy, Leila?"), and even of being sexually manipulated by the seedy town Reverend ("Leila," he pathologizes her, "[t]here's always been something very wrong [...with] you" (188, 197, 240). Various narrative instances, then, forcibly express the cruel underbelly of the extant sociopolitical order in small-town Midwestern America; they expose both patriarchal violence in its diffuse formations and the foreclosure of any meaningful feminine sociality or symbolic.

Leila's social estrangement owes itself, then, partly to past exploitation and is such that she is radically benumbed, empty, and dispassionate "like a closed white door" (14). She feels nothing even in her marriage: "feeling for my heart," she admits, "there was never anything there" (75). Her job as a receptionist at the local Swan Motel allows her the opportunity to become a small-time prostitute on the side for sixty dollars each sordid and increasingly violent sexual encounter. "I was saving money," she says, "for something that glistened a bit in the distance [...] something I might have glimpsed once from the corner of my eye as a child [...] Sometimes it was just [...] a hill of sugar, or a pillar of salt. Sometimes it rose to the surface of my dreams like a second skin, a kind of foreskin floating to the top of a pan of scalded milk" (4-5). This early passage instances one of *Suspicious River*'s most pronounced linguistic patterns in which obscenity and negativity invade the poetic text. Kasischke's ambiguous quest narrative, in other words, takes the form of a profound poetics of anxiety and traces a painful structure of desire. Leila is saving for something, for some strangely extravagant expenditure which becomes more defined in the provocative closing scenes of the text as they focus more abundantly upon the desire for death ("that flat white thing," [180]) through violent sadomasochistic sex.

Part 2: A Mother's Return: Remembered Object of Desire *par excellence*

[...] eroticism only includes a domain marked off by the violation of rules. It is always a matter of going beyond the limits allowed.
Bataille, *The History of Eroticism* in *The Accursed Share* 124

[...] desire has loss and danger as its object.
Bataille, *The History of Eroticism* in *The Accursed Share* 107

Although *Suspicious River* is erotically sensationalistic in many ways, on a psychosexual level the novel convinces. The text is doubly plotted, offering a persistent dialogue between the past and the present. *Suspicious River* parallels (through a discontinuous collage of events, memories, fantasies, and dreams) details from Leila's childhood and from the life of her now-dead mother, Bonnie Murray, with the present narrative of Leila herself. Leila's memories of her mother direct (in fact they rigorously determine) the current narrative trajectory. The novel, in other words, moves progressively toward a dangerous retrieval of past psychosexual formations. The mutual narratives of the mother and the daughter produce the sense of a non-linear articulation of a shared continuity of marginalized female experience. They produce, to borrow the words of trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, "a shared pattern of suffering" (*Unclaimed Experience* 1) as well as the troubling sense of inevitability or stasis. There is the sense certainly that in *Suspicious River* we witness a subject compelled by history and without distinct individual agency.

Suspicious River begins early to thematize the mother's centrality to the daughter's subjective development. The fiction's initial pages present the mother prior to repression in the language of extensive erotic pleasure—in the language of pleasure without limit. They question the fiction of the proper bourgeois family romance and they punctuate as well (through their intense emphasis upon loss and upon transgressive eroticism) the mother's complex importance to the daughter's melancholic subject formation:

> The white flash of a sailboat [...]. A woman in a navy blue striped bikini: She has long legs. She's holding a dented can of beer, stepping onto the boat. Her narrow foot, toenails painted red, is poised for a moment in shimmering air.
>
> [...] The woman holds her arms out in the air like wings [...]. She laughs, and a shirtless man, tanned, takes her hand. [...] She stumbles, the boat rocks harder.
>
> He doesn't embrace her when she falls into him, but their bodies meet.
>
> They look, then, at me, and I see his hand flat in the small of her bare back. The hand is dark and large against her pale waist. Her shoulders are round and smooth as blank faces, gleaming.
>
> 'Bye-bye, Leila,' she sings.

> Red fingernails and flesh—she is drinking from the beer, cold and sweaty in her hand. Waving bye-bye baby with the other.
>
> He waves bye-bye, too—my uncle, my father's younger brother [...].
>
> They are carried away together by wind on my uncle's boat. The sail, a sharp knife of light then a bright blur receding.
>
> When they are farther into the water, a fading image, over-exposed in so much wild white clear as gin, she reaches behind her and unsnaps the back of her bikini top. It slips off fast—a quick yank of sexual gravity like a scream.
>
> She holds the bikini top in the empty hand and waves it toward the shore back and forth in arcs above her head, as if in surrender.
>
> [...] I can't be much older than four or five. Her breasts are even brighter than the rest of her body and more pale than the glare all around her, but I can't stare into it any longer: a shock of skin like white milk spilled all over a wax-white tray.
>
> [...] There's a foamy rolling of water between my uncle, the woman with her bare breasts under a beating wing now, and the place where my father and I stand with our eyes nearly closed to see it better. She turns her back to us, and what we can see of it is a blank slate, as they say. She is moving naked over water and moving away.
>
> She's my mother, and then she dies. (16-17)

This early figuration of the unrepressed maternal body is among the text's most compelling and provocative narrative sequences. Part of the transgressivity of the above portrait of the dysfunctional family romance is that Kasischke writes the mother as corporeal, subversive, and sensual, and she thereby upsets traditional discourses of the selfless and desireless maternal. *Suspicious River*'s adulterous mother figure (with her painted nails and naked flesh) is not only the object of desire *par excellence* of Kasischke's text, but seemingly she is also a sexual subject acting upon her own erotic accord. Kasischke's portrait of the mother challenges, then, what Jessica Benjamin identifies as the "taboo on maternal sexual agency" (*The Bonds* 113). In addition, in the above textual sequence, Kasischke dispenses to a significant extent with conventional, Freudian paradigms of the daughter's supposed erotic focus away from the mother and toward the father, and disruptively recasts libidinal attachment in decidedly feminine terms of the daughter's prevailing desire for the maternal. Leila's mother, however, is drawn not simply in idealised terms of a flourishing and flouting sensuality. Rather, she is more complexly and ambiguously imagined as a source of abandonment, of melancholic loss, of illicit sexual betrayal, and of death as well.

As the mother's story unfolds through the daughter's eyes, erotic pleasure and love become inextricably linked to what we usually think of as their opposites: pain and death. Bataille remarks most notably on the paradoxical relationship of sex, violence, and death, and his work might be read alongside Kasischke's fiction. In *Eroticism: Death & Sensuality*, Bataille writes that, "the whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators" (17). "[E]lemental violence," he says, "kindles every manifestation of eroticism. [...] Eroticism opens the way to death. [...] and through death to continuity" (16, 24-25). For Bataille, our sense of "discontinuity" (of individual limit) is surpassed primarily through erotic experience and ultimately through death. *Suspicious River* I think formulates (on both thematic and linguistic levels) a decidedly Bataillean kind of eroticism: the text explicitly thematizes sexual excess and extremity, and its thematic of sex unto death has a corresponding psycholinguistics expressed in the violence of Leila's language. Kasischke's heroine, in other words, is psycholinguistically preoccupied with life surpassing its limits, with destruction and decay. Her language figures repeatedly intense life compelled through increasing excess to deterioration and ultimately to death. She speaks, for example, of "exhausted garden[s]," of a "rosebush [...] heavy with dead red petals," of "the wrecked splendor of apple blossoms and magnolia petals [...] scattered like chicken feathers now," and also of fourth-of-July "Bombs exploding beautiful and more elaborate than death" (260, 256, 121, 268). It is, however, Leila's mother's body (and later, Leila's own body) that is the locus for the poetic elaboration of excessiveness, and that is presented most provocatively *in sexual extremis* and at its corporeal limits.

Part 3: "My mother": the Trauma of Witnessing

> *An 'I' overcome by the corpse—such is [...] the abject [...]. The death that 'I' am provokes horror, there is a choking sensation that does not separate inside from outside but draws them the one into the other, indefinitely. [...] inescapable witness of that torture—of that truth.*
>
> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 25

> *[...] the whole of our culture in the west depends upon the murder of the mother.*
>
> Luce Irigaray as qtd. in Margaret Whitford's "Maternal genealogy and the symbolic" 75

> *[...] the desirable prostitute, a figure in which death is readable in the aspects of excessive life. [...] she signifies eroticism, which is itself the locus where life and death become confused with one another....But this is true at the extreme limit, at the apex, [...] prostitution makes an offered woman into a dead object, [...] the dead point of the passionate outburst.*
>
> Bataille, *The History of Eroticism* in *The Accursed Share* 142-43

The lethal dimensions of Bonnie Murray's love affair with her husband's brother (he is a man, remarks Leila, with "murder-you eyes" who "would press your wrist against the wall and tear your blouse if you told him no" [229]) are progressively narrativized. When the mother's prostitution with other men is discovered by her lover/brother-in-law, the eroticism between the mother and the brother turns brutal. Leila's memories of maternal victimization are striking largely because of the tonal neutrality—the startling numbness—in which they are recounted: "I hear them through the bedroom wall. [...] She doesn't scream when he slaps her laughter in the face. I hear him slap her and slap her again; I hear just him, a low groan in his throat each time he slaps her. I listen [...]. Not caring whether or not it will ever stop" (126-27). Succeeding further emotionless recollections of eroticized maternal suffering, Leila narrates the incident of her mother's death by knifing. In the following passage, Leila recounts in metaphorically associative prose her awakening to the real, or to the obscene appeal of that which lies beyond the pleasure principle:[3]

> She screams, 'You're killing me.'
>
> I sit up in bed when the damp smell of leaves presses down into my sleep like a slinky piece of sky.
>
> It's October, and I'm seven.
>
> Black wings, black fur, mulch outside in the midnight blue-black as grass. The clammy hair of a pumpkin, all guts in the carver's hands. A slash of moon in the crack of curtains, and the musky smell of an animal's stomach.

> I've smelled those guts before: once, when my mother cut open a yellow melon, and it was rotten—and once while the neighbors cleaned a doe in their back yard and the second day of hunting season.
>
> That tearing sound of a small-toothed comb through long blond hair when they opened the doe. Dogs sniffing around with their hot, hollow breath while it swung from a rope and ran with rusty water—though the dirt soaked it up like an old blanket, old leaves turned to rags, wet for a while, then stiff with it.
>
> I follow the scent to my parent's room. I see my uncle, first, sitting at the edge of my parents' bed. Blood on his white T-shirt. It's steak pink, and it smells like mud and meat, tang of iron in tap water, a dark layer of decay just beneath the ground.
>
> My mother is in a red silk slip on the bed.
>
> A red silk slip yanked up over her belly, just covering her breasts, naked legs. Black patent leather heels on her white feet. Naked arms. Black V of hair between her legs. Mouth open. A pink froth.
>
> But it's blood, not a slip, sleeving down over her breast like silk. (139-40)

Jessica Benjamin argues that, "the basic pattern of domination […] is set in motion by" the repudiation of the mother (*The Bonds* 220). Certainly, Leila's adherence to a sadomasochistic script in which she assumes the victim role is "set in motion" by the unequivocal denigration of her mother through murder. Leila's psychosexual development is interrupted and frozen at the traumatic moment of her mother's death where eros and thanatos unite. Her initial incomprehensibility—"My mother […] in a red silk slip"—is consistent with Cathy Caruth's theorizing of trauma as "an event […]

experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and […] therefore not [fully] available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly" (*Unclaimed* 4). The above passage, where the sight of the mother's body ("dank and velvet with death," as Leila later comments [213]) is the sight of her wound, comprises all of Part Two of Kasischke's three-part novel, and gives structural import, thereby, to the excitation of such witnessing. In other words, the mother's dead body lies both literally and figuratively at the heart of this text, at the heart of its reiterations and re-enactments. The dead mother signifies most provocatively for Leila the seduction of death, the attraction (the *jouissance*) of death. In the novel's repetitive historicity, the mutilated maternal body comes to signify also the past that will return.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva sees the maternal as "coded as 'abject'" and she discusses the corpse, furthermore, as "the utmost of abjection" (64, 4). *Suspicious River*'s above narrative sequence linguistically adheres (through its phraseology of "musky smell […] animal's […] guts […] rotten […] rusty […] old") to a thematics of the maternal dead body's abjection. Yet, concurrently the scene eroticizes abjection;[4] it sensualises the mother's corpse with the emphasis upon "red silk […] breasts, naked legs. Black patent leather heels […] white feet. Naked arms. […] legs. Mouth open." Leila's own sexualization and subjective formation trace their sources primarily to this defining moment of matricide where violence, eroticism, abjection, and death unite, and where the cut, violated, and open female body (where the corpse, in fact) becomes a figure of imprintation, of mimetic self-reference. *Suspicious River*, in other words, is concerned with how the self is formed both by social conditioning and empathetic mirroring.

Following her mother's murder, Leila, to use Kristeva's terms, becomes a devotee "of the abject [...who does] not cease looking [...] for the desirable and terrifying [...] fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body" (54). The fiction's psychoanalytic structure is deviant, then, in the sense that we witness in *Suspicious River* not the "clean and proper" individualised self, but rather the indistinction between the self and the other, the lack of delimitation between the daughter and the mother. In Kasischke's narrative we are confronted, in other words, by an aberrant or abject heroine, who desires not to leave the mother, not to be other than her. The novel traces, furthermore, various nostalgic and brutally masochistic attempts to recuperate the maternal, to re-embody her through mimetic repetition. In Leila's reiteration of the maternal role through excessive promiscuity and brutal sexuality, we see the desire *for* the mother conflate perilously with the desire to *become* the mother.

Part 4: The Sadist and the Post-Oedipal Text

[...] the girl must contend with a third figure beyond Mommy and Daddy en route toward social co-existence.
Juliet Flower MacCannell, *The Hysteric's Guide* 35

Mother, I want to...
Come on baby, take a chance with us
……………………………………………
And meet me at the back of the blue bus.
This is the end, beautiful friend.
The Doors, "The End," *The Best of the Doors*

In many ways, *Suspicious River* attributes the death drive (the "obscene" or asocial "will-to-jouissance" [MacCannell 20]) to the feminine, to the mother and by transference to the daughter as well. But the novel in fact does not make such simple or stereotypically gendered identifications. Kasischke's text, furthermore, is not an oedipal allegory of the daughter's ultimate triumph over the mother's lethal lure. In chapter one of *The Hysteric's Guide* (entitled "The Soul of Woman under Sadism"), Juliet Flower MacCannell discusses Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* as a post-oedipal film in which the promise of "lethal *jouissance*" issues not "directly from the mother as in Freud's analysis, but comes to the daughter through the agency of the sadist," who brings to the girl "a secret knowledge about the nihilism of human life" (19, 17). The pervert or sadist, says MacCannell, "is the cardinal and unremarked element in the way the girl today encounters what stirs her. [...] the pervert [...] acts out what the mother no longer has to: the power to enjoy, and to foreclose the need to join society" (17-18). Kasischke's narrative—wherein the sadist plays a pivotal role in the "formation of the girl and [...] her relation to her sex" (MacCannell 19)—enacts a post-oedipal situation notably similar to the one MacCannell describes. In *Suspicious River*, the sadist comes first in the figure of Leila's murderous uncle attracting women (including Bonnie Murray) who, comments Leila, "thought they wanted a man like that, but what they really wanted was to die" (230). The sadist reappears in the fiction's present time in the unseemly (but to Leila familiar form) of Gary W. Jensen, a small-town pimp who becomes in the text's strange language of displacement, "like a father" and "like a mother" as well (145, 189). Gary Jensen yanks, says Leila, "Something deadly [...] out of my body [...]. Something scarlet, secret, like the wish to die or kill" (89). Promising "the beyond of sex" (MacCannell 30), Gary Jensen stirs Leila's already acute nihilistic sensibility: "with Gary Jensen on my body," she thinks, "there is flash after flash of empty brightness. White air.

[…] Sun/nothing/sun. […] I know I am in love. […] my pelvis bruising under […his] brass belt buckle" (149).

Initially, Gary Jensen seems harmless enough "like someone […] familiar from a TV show—maybe the deputy on *Gunsmoke*," but who easily admits, as he puts it, to "something sick in me," and whose sadism in fact proves, in an immensely troubling way, necessary and useful to Leila's corresponding masochism (47, 48). Following the violence of their first sexual encounter where Leila moves "with […Gary Jensen's blows] into […their] own curved momentum" while "silver wings fly [surrealistically] over the swan motel," she inspects herself for signs of alteration and thinks plainly that, "Nothing had changed. My skirt was creased, but it wasn't torn. My hair was messy, long and copper […]. On my neck—high, under my ear, as if I'd been playing a violin—there was a small red mark. Nothing more noticeable than that" (56, 221, 35). Apart from the paradoxical and metaphorical insistence upon an aesthetics of cruelty finding music in mistreatment, the above lines are important I think for two reasons: they imply a thematic of possible transformation achieved through pain, and they also begin to narrate the ways in which "the obscene figure" with whom "the girl contends is," as MacCannell argues, "not maternal but [in fact] sadistic" (11).

In the novel's unfolding pages, Leila deliberately undergoes incrementally intensified sexual violence and exploitation. There are more brutal and cruel sexual encounters where Gary pushes Leila's "face hard into his lap, holding onto […her] hair," while she becomes "a poisoned sparrow […fluttering] in its bloody nest," and imagines, moreover, the abject enjoyment of being "hurt. […] slapped and dragged […] back into this world. A new-born. […] knocked […] into my skin from the oblivion where I'd been" (133, 134). Leila aspires through violence (she is "gasping for it, bending closer," she says) to feel "caught […] and thrilled at the same time" (134, 133). The tone and direction of her desire, though, shift when Gary later pimps Leila (complacent and now "accessible as something dead" [153]) to his loathsome friends in the back room of Ottawa City's sleazy *Big City Bar*. One customer, "dragon tattooed" and built of "[s]olid muscle," makes Leila feel "small and exhausted, worn out." Another man, "slippery" and "slouched," bites her "flesh as if it isn't real" in order to make himself come in his own hand (167, 168, 169). Amidst all of this sexual sordidness, Leila finds odd "comfort in the plaid of […the] couch cushions scratching at [...her] thighs." Humiliation becomes something strangely ordinary as Leila imagines that she is "*Down-to-earth*" and thinks: "nothing flies. No birds, no moths. No shock, loss, disappointment. No personality, maybe" (168). As the tonal dissonances and contradictory impulses of the above two sexual sequences suggest, Leila's masochistic desire is ambiguously drawn in language both exhilarated and dejected, in metaphors of both redemption and death. In the earlier scene with Gary Jensen, through pain and humiliation (fantasised mostly albeit) Leila experiences an intensified sense-of-self and a relief from an otherwise pervasive emotional dysphoria. Yet, the incidents at the *Big City Bar* imply something different: they signify the disruption of subjectivity, the negative exhaustion of all resistance and tension. While the first masochistically focused scene thematizes the violent becoming of the subject, the later Ottawa City scene gives paradoxical voice to the drive toward disidentity and death. Jessica Benjamin discusses this type of narrative trajectory that moves *from* the desire "to break [self-] encasement through violation" and *toward* subjective dissolution as an "inevitable" movement in the sadomasochistic scenario. For

Benjamin, the masochist's wish to introduce tension and "counteract numbness with pain" (the masochist's "wish to be reached, penetrated, found" [*The Bonds* 65, 73]) leads ultimately to the loss of resistance and to a self ironically vacuous, or as Leila says, without "personality, maybe."

The paradoxicality of Leila's desire (expressed in her feelings of being coincidentally "used up and brand-new at the same time. [...] remade from the waste" [125]) is signified throughout *Suspicious River*. There is an imagistic profusion—or an oxymoronic confusion—of things dying, being born, expending themselves, and being renewed throughout the fiction. In Leila's mind, for example, the wind-gusts nudging a hanging, dead rabbit are metaphorized into "the quick breaths of a woman dying or giving birth" (81). She explains her orgasm with Gary Jensen in similarly equivocal language that blends pleasure and pain, birth and death: "the coming fluttered improbably," she says, "like a bird dying between my legs. I hadn't imagined it would be like that, and it made me open and close around him like the mouth of something underwater and warm, something not yet born" (86). Leila's thoughts about the abortion she had at seventeen likewise testify to a perceptual association of pain, blood, death, and renewal. After the procedure and the botched insertion of an IUD, Leila felt, she says, "suddenly born—wet with sweat [...] spilling bloody [...] that IUD like a fishhook [...] caught in my belly, bloodying me like my mother" (135, 151). Grim memories of waiting "for the fetus to grow large enough to scrape" blend into anodyne recollections of "tulips [...] blooming, smooth and black, or wagging their red tongues [...]. April [...] sparrows darting across the church lawn under the shadow of a cross. Wet wings on Good Friday and a hazy yellow sky. Then another blizzard, [...] thick with slush, on

Easter Sunday—burying the new color under a rattling cough" (84). Not only do these lines draw together the sacred and the profane by placing abortion and genital violation audaciously within a Christian economy of death, salvation, and resurrection, but Leila's language (in each of the narrative fragments cited in this paragraph) indicates a subjective condition commensurate, I think, with the wound inflicted first upon her mother. And, yet, the above lines psycholinguistically reveal also a subject striving to move beyond the negative—a subject desirous in fact of translating pain into a new possibility. I commented earlier that the negative or the obscene persistently invades Kasischke's poetic text. And while this is the case in many specific instances, the novel's larger linguistic structure struggles I think toward the positive, toward renewal through devastation.

Part 5: The Masochist in Sade's Boudoir

I want to hear, I want to hear
The scream of the butterfly.
The Doors, "When the Music's Over," *The Best of the Doors*

I imagine [...] infinite suffering [...] blood and open bodies [...]. I imagine myself covered with blood, broken but transfigured [...].
Bataille, "The Practice of Joy Before Death" 239

Both sadism and masochism imply that a particular quantity of libidinal energy be [...] displaced and put at the service of Thanatos.
Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty* 110

Suspicious River's concluding narrative sequences (which blend memories and dreams with the present, violent events) extend the dialectical relation of the masochistic body in pain not only to abjection and death, but also to renewal and transformation. The final pages of the fiction articulate intensifying docility in the face of increasing brutality. Gary Jensen drives Leila to an old farmhouse on the outskirts of town to be his whore and to service his friends. In Leila's thinking, Gary Jensen's thunderbird becomes a "a coffin of silver glass" piloting Leila "toward [...a] new life, which waits like a mother at the end of a long, white tunnel of light" (205, 203). The farmhouse where they arrive and where Leila is set up in a stranger's yellow bedroom—"This is like being born again," she affirms—is the Sadean stage for a brutal gang-bang of sacrificial proportion (221). The house is a place of domination where Leila is isolated and then passed between numerous men. Although she disassociates from the humiliation she is subject to, she coincidentally affirms the transposition into a new life with syntactically disruptive phrases like the following: "my eyes closed tight the whole time. Hovering above my body waiting to be born" (229). Leila is beaten and bloodied, but more shocking is the fact that she aestheticizes bodily disfigurement; she transforms her pain linguistically into objects of beauty. Her bruises, she imagines, are "magenta, or midnight blue. [...] There's blood [...]. Blood," she proclaims, "I can see black roses on my cheekbones still swelling" (254, 259). The tonality of the previous lines (and of the novel's close generally) is astonishing, I find, because in the context of extreme degradation and self-loss Leila's voice approaches ecstatic *jouissance*. Not only is there an experimental excess of language approaching delirium, but there is also an escalating textual surrealism stemming from the disparity between Leila's self-expending excitation ("I've finally bought what I'd been saving that money to buy," she thinks) and her intensifying bodily imperilment and loss of subjectivity as conveyed through the following passage: "'Open your eyes,' he says, […] but I can't open my eyes. […] He slaps me […] but I can't move. […] The bedroom door opens and closes while a bare white weight presses down on me, spreads my legs. […] Something rattling leaves off the trees until they're skeletons again. Someone says, 'Open your mouth,' and he laughs when I do" (225, 232-33).

The preceding image of Leila as pliant, open-mouthed, and unspeaking contributes to an already established pattern of similar disturbing textual representations of female discursive repression or incapacity. Early in the narrative, for example, when Leila tries to speak to her husband she cannot communicate and imagines herself only as a site of inarticulate lack: "I opened my mouth to answer," she says, "it was empty. A wet hole full of wind" (54). Although Leila's mother, on the other hand, has the beautiful choir "voice of an angel," it is implicitly censured as extravagant excess:

> My mother stands […] glowing […] her voice lifts through empty air above the pews and hymnals […].
>
> My father has his hands pressed over his kneecaps as her voice rises above us all, an invisible bird—one perfect, earth-shattering note. High and cold, it is a needle taking a piece of white thread up to the ceiling like a stitch.
>
> Ave—half breath, half pure steel scream—Maria.
>
> Helium, the simplest and lightest of elements.
>
> All the women in church touch their throats at that moment, afraid the sound has come from them. The men look away, ashamed. But the children look up to the

> ceiling, believing we might even be able to see that lost note as it pierces the thin blue skin of the sky like a woman's wrist. (143, 42)

In "Sorties," Cixous associates singing with the lost mother and writes that, "The Voice sings from a time before law, before the Symbolic took one's breath away." The maternal singing voice, she continues, is "a force that does not let itself be cut off but that runs codes ragged" (93). Consistent with Cixous's understanding of the subversiveness of the maternal voice, Bonnie Murray sings in expressive contradistinction to (and in apparent transcendence of) the law of the social.

While Bonnie Murray is associated with the sacred through her voice, like Leila she is nonetheless also figured as speechless and outside of the symbolic. Viewing an old photo of her mother, Leila envisions her as attempting speech but as arrested in fact in linguistic deficiency:[5]

> My mother has just opened her mouth to say a word, and her mouth is frozen in the shape of a spoon. Silence is all that comes out.
>
> Over the years I come to believe, like a child, that my mother is saying my name in that aborted breath, her pink mouth matching the roses behind her [...]
>
> But as I get older I imagine instead that what comes out of her open mouth at the moment of this snapshot is a long sweet howl like a hungry cat. Not interrupted. Even by death. A long, round sound like train brakes screeching into infinity. (25)

This frightening image of Bonnie Murray as unable to speak or to enter the symbolic brings to mind Edvard Munch's famous expressionist painting *The Scream* as well as Beckett's perhaps less well known thirty second existentialist play *Breath* comprised only of an empty, dark stage broken by the sound of a single screaming voice. It contributes to a twentieth century representational history of the catastrophic subject for whom language fails. Many other artists and writers, Sylvia Plath for instance, might be included in this history. In her famous autobiographical poem "Daddy," Plath draws self-conscious attention to her problematic relation to language, to her own voice, faltering and inarticulate: "The tongue stuck in my jaw. / It stuck in a barb wire snare. / Ich, ich, ich, ich, / I could hardly speak" (l. 26-29). In Plath's poem, as in Kasischke's fiction, the traumatised and disarticulated subject is clearly gendered and devastated not directly by world war (as is more often the case in early and mid-twentieth century art), but by the more domestic realities of patriarchal disavowal of and violence against the feminine.

In many regards, *Suspicious River*'s figuration of the unspeaking, masochistic feminine subject stands in close textual relation to the figure of the hysteric who Freud defines largely in terms of childhood sexual trauma and of consequent discursive inadequacy. In his work on hysterical female patients, Freud links hysterical attacks with various symptoms like narrative non-linearity, unintelligibility, and "infantile forms of violent pollution" or the "involuntary passing of urine." His symptomotology also defines hysteria by acts of literal tongue biting and by what he calls "*absences*" or loss of consciousness ("Hysterical Attacks" 101). Curiously, each of these marks of hysteria is present in some way in Kasischke's novel. Hysteria, in fact, can be seen as operating textually on many levels: in the lack of traditional temporal sequencing, in the often fragmented poetical prose,[6] in a strange *tableau vivant* of Leila peeing herself as a young school-girl ("I didn't mean to [...] water ruining my dress [...] a puddle of urine under me. [....] Miss Lovette [...] a pinched look on her face [...] edges of my desk [...]

rocking […]. Something inside my body was shaking its way out" [165]), in the thematic of self-loss or subjective negation, and also in the passive imagery (a variation upon Freud's more active tongue biting) of open-mouthed female voicelessness or aphonia. The narrative furthermore contains an explicit reference to hysteria occurring when Reverend Roberts uses Leila for sex but refuses to discuss with her the horror of her mother's murder, and thereby forecloses for her the possibility of symbolizing maternal loss: "my body," Leila imagines, "could have flown into an explosion of feathers […]. *Hysterical*, I thought, I was going to *become* it. I swallowed and swallowed, covering up my eyes with my hands and then my mouth, to keep the hysterical feathers in" (244). Leila is forced partly through the Reverend's phallocentric disavowal of the lost mother ("Reverend Roberts […] gripped my arms […] pushing […] my body into itself, as if to keep it all […] in […]. [He] said, 'Who cares Leila'" [244]) into a negated position of distressed self-containment. The awful farmhouse violation scene occurring later in the narrative extends this motif of hysterical silence or, to be Freudian, it develops the motif of hysterical *absence*. In the stranger's yellow bedroom, Leila inhabits silence or *absence* to the maximum. At the fiction's close we see Leila pushing self-negation to life-threateningly masochistic extremes.

My suggestion, then, is that *Suspicious River* combines "hysterical [trauma] narrative"[7] with what might be called masochistic desire narrative. Specifically, Kasischke's novel brings aspects of the two "perversions," hysteria and masochism, into conversation with one another. This blending or confusability of the two conditions (and narrative forms) is perhaps most apparent in the text's preoccupation with the mother who, argues Deleuze, is central to the masochistic aesthetic, and whose body, claims

Freud, is the site for which the hysteric mourns. However, complicating matters of easy aesthetic classification (and matters of underlying psychoanalytic structures) is the fact that *Suspicious River* incorporates some formal patterns of sadistic rather than masochistic textuality, the most immediately apparent being the accelerated presentations of alarming violence against the body.[8] In addition, it is again Kasischke's complex portrayal of the mother that contributes to a certain (in this case, sadomasochistic) formal ambiguity. Deleuze claims in *Coldness and Cruelty* that masochistic textuality reifies the mother (it expresses "loyalty to the maternal rule"), whereas the sadistic narrative "ultimately rests on the theme of [...] inciting the daughter to torture and murder the mother. In sadism the Oedipal image of woman is made as it were, to explode: the mother becomes the victim *par excellence*." Sadism, Deleuze continues, puts "an effective end to all procreation [...] in [...] an active negation of the mother" (96, 59-60). In *Suspicious River*, this sort of "active negation" is abundantly present in various textual elements: not only do Bonnie Murray's mutilation and death evoke the debased maternal, but Leila's botched abortion and consequent infertility likewise articulate death to the procreative mother. The fact also that Leila seeks the restaging of her mother's murder is, to say the least, sadistically edged. And yet in performing the past by substituting for the mother in the present (by *becoming* her), the masochistic intensity of Leila's desire is brought vividly to the fore. In Leila's own language, "the wish to die" becomes conflated with the opposing "wish to [...] kill" (14). Leila's profound psychic ambivalence toward the maternal is highlighted as well in her burial of all photographs of her mother ("I pressed [...] into the muck [...] my mother's photograph curled up wet around the edges in its grave"), and in her later but unsuccessful attempt "to dig [...] up" the last image she buried (83, 84). Leila's initial covering over and denial of the maternal image can be seen as sadistically motivated in a Deleuzean sense, while her later attempt at retrieval signifies conversely a latent (and on a symbolic level, masochistic) "loyalty to the maternal rule."

Throughout the novel's violent denouement references to the mother rhythmically, almost incantorily, reassert themselves: death waits, for instance, "like a mother" and Leila is "thrilled," as she puts it, by the "thought [that] I looked exactly like my mother" (203, 252). There is another moment, melancholic and filled with loss, during which Leila dreams in the yellow bedroom of walking toward her childhood house and finding something "tossed or [...] fallen at the end of the walk, near the front step of our house with its blank face. […] I bend down to see it," she says, "but all I see is my own face reflected in an icy pool […] I realize I must be someone's child" (211). The depressive supplication ending this dream sequence underscores both Leila's desire for recognition or discovery, as well as her desire for maternal return. Leila's abject self-production and masochism are the means for managing maternal loss, for getting back to the mother by repeating the circumstances in which she was lost. At the farmhouse, when one of the more sadistic and freakish visitors to the bedroom passes a knife (poeticized by Leila into a "frozen diamond […] mirror fragment of the sky fallen onto my throat") over Leila's body, she goes to self-mutilating (but familiar) extremes to repeat the maternal narrative by plunging "straight into that knife with all the life [...she] has" (254, 255). In doing so, she dramatically re-probes old wounds, re-marks the condition of abjection, and re-performs the sacrificial way in which lack has been inscribed on the female form.

Part 6: Beyond Abasement: a Few Steps Toward Something Other than Lethal *Jouissance*

This is enough, I think: I've tasted space.
Leila, *Suspicious River* 268

[...] a contemporary ethics [...] an heretical ethics [...] is undeath, love.
Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" 185

[...] going through flesh—going through the point where the unity of a person is torn apart—is necessary if, in losing oneself, one wants to rediscover oneself in the unity of love [...].
Bataille, "The College of Sociology" 250

To halt this cycle of domination [...] the other must make a difference. This means that women must claim their subjectivity and so be able to survive destruction.
Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love* 221

In the Introduction to this thesis I briefly discussed Jessica Benjamin's view that in cultural representation and in everyday life there persists a problematic and "deep structure of gender polarity," in which sadism and masochism are "associated with masculinity and femininity" respectively (*The Bonds* 74). One of Benjamin's most disturbing contentions is that "once the tension between subjection and resistance [on the part of the female slave or masochist] dissolves, death or abandonment is the inevitable end of the story [...]. Metaphorically [...] and sometimes literally," she says, "the sadomasochistic relationship tends toward death, or [...] toward deadness, numbness" (*The Bonds* 65). *Suspicious River*, in seeming textual accord with Benjamin's theoretical work, traces for the most part a disturbingly femicidal narrative path in which intensity leads to apathy, or in which the desire to "break [subjective] encasement through violation" leads ultimately to nihility and death (Benjamin 65). However, just when Leila's predicament appears to allow for death as the only possible symbolic option, we are offered a revisionary ending challenging the text's otherwise overwhelming sense of traumatic and sadomasochistic fatalism. *Suspicious River*'s concluding pages, in other words, open toward a new, briefly utopian and reparational narrative moment. Contrary indeed to some early reviews of the novel suggesting that Leila dies in the bed her mother has bequeathed to her so-to-speak,[9] Kasischke's heroine manages an escape which is enunciated in language irreverent and iconoclastic in its radical disinvestiture from the law of the Father writ large:

> I get down on the earth, kneeling at first, looking up at the sky as I do. If you saw me now, you might think I was a woman knocked to her knees by the love of a god, but I'm not. I'm hiding from everything, especially God. […] my bloody dress. […]
>
> The blood on my dress has gone stiff across my breasts, and it feels like a new, tougher skin.
>
> An animal's hide.
>
> […] suddenly I'm dropped, bloody and crying, by white wings into the world. [...] Languages are forgotten or invented. Fires die. And a million random events begin to make sense in what is no longer the void. […]
>
> I'm born, a girl without wings, and when I look up at my mother's face through a new prism of tears, she is the world without end, amen […]. (264-65)

Throughout *Suspicious River*, Leila figuratively "reads" her mother's story (as she has literally read various newspaper headlines like the following: "*Beyond recognition* comes to mind. *Identified by dental records* comes to mind. I remember a headline, *Two Severed Female Legs Found in Muskegon Dumpster*, and another article, an inch long, about a hunter whose dog dug up the body of a girl I'd gone to high school with. *A runaway* they'd called her when she disappeared one Saturday after a football game [...]. But she'd been strangled with a belt and buried in a duffel bag instead" [259]) as a plot of feminine victimization and vivisection "written" to be followed. The novel, as I have indicated, concerns itself with how existing sociosexual patterns and cultural representations inscript and even predetermine the manner in which we become gendered subjects, or the manner in which women persistently occupy the roles of the wounded, the bloodied, and the dead. Yet, Kasischke provides also for the possibility of positive intervention and change—she offers a closing novelistic moment of oppositional rupture where Leila separates herself from her mother's deadly fate without delimiting or defining the maternal as abject. Quite the opposite, in fact, Leila's revisionary response to the prevailing femicidal script allows her not simply to live, but to be reborn powerfully (with a "tougher skin") into the imagined possibility of a new language, of a new symbolic or iconography of the feminine (of the maternal) divine: "Languages are forgotten or invented," thinks Leila, "my mother's face [...] she is the world without end, amen."

I would like to recall for a moment the text's earlier motif of enforced silence because it is effectively broken not only in Leila's above, explicit reference to language, but also in the novel's dramatic denouement, in which Leila imagines her mother finally speaking: "Breathing, I press my ear closer to the ground, and finally, after all this time, my mother speaks to me, in a voice of water. [...] *If you want to live, you should run,* she whispers. *If you don't, close your eyes, and it's over.* Time passes. Whole lives. But then, unlikely as it seems, I stand up, slow. [...] something rises up....*from* me. A tangible scream. […] So, I run. […] I don't look back. The future, like the past, is only a few steps ahead of me" (266-69). This section thus constitutes both an imagined and a "tangible" filling in of the feminine linguistic void as marked out by the phallocentric economy. It constitutes an exploration of new options for women besides silence, lack, and death and insists that women have a vocal and living place in the world. The restored voice of the mother—her belated spoken address as it were—is a source of symbolic power providing for Leila an agential aspect of subjectivity and pointing to new ways of taking action. The recovered maternal voice, in other words, is not the prelinguistic voice (*Suspicious River* does not lead back to the preverbal, childhood chora[10]), but rather it is an oddly disembodied voice speaking nonetheless the possibility of sociosexual agency and attempting to establish the conditions necessary for change or difference.

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth postulates that at the heart of traumatic repetition compulsion is the attempt to reach "a voice […] *through the wound.* […a voice] that bears witness to the past […and] that witnesses a truth that […living survivors] cannot fully know" (2-3). Caruth's observation (based upon a reading of Tasso's romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* as discussed by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) offers, I think, a provocative way to read *Suspicious River*'s narrative trajectory which moves (through catastrophic repetition and wounding) ultimately to a voice bearing "witness to the past" and speaking hitherto unthought possibilities for action.[11] Caruth makes another remark strikingly relevant to an understanding of Kasischke's text. She writes that, "we can also read the address of the voice […] as the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (8). *Suspicious River* develops certainly this kind of story where the personal experience leads persistently back to "the trauma of another." Or, to put things differently, in Kasischke's narrative the private, individual story of melancholia and isolation ultimately traces a larger, more collective history.

Apart from the fact that Leila's ordeal exceeds the individual subject by pointing back through memory to a more extensive genealogy, there is another sense in which Kasischke's fiction opens toward "the encounter with another" but in so doing moves *against* historical (psychosocial) patterns and gestures instead toward a different *future* possibility of feminine community. I noted earlier that Leila's monologue articulates the devastating absence of any existing sociality of women. *Suspicious River*'s final two pages repair this insufficiency through their portrayal of Leila's discovery and rescue by a fellow female attendant from the Swan Motel:

> 'Leila?'
>
> A woman shouts. [...]
>
> I open my arms to her, and then hold them above my head as I wade into the river. [...]
>
> And at the edge of the water, wading toward me, Millie glows, rose-flushed in the sun coming up. Her hair is wild [...] her eyes are wide with colored light. I stumble up.
>
> 'Leila. My god. You're bleeding to death,' she says. She is sobbing then, [...].
>
> Again, I am on my knees.

> This time, I put my face down at Millie's feet [...] and then she bends down to touch my hair. I remember hands. I remember being touched [...]. My eyes opening for the first time. (270)

This is an extraordinary closing scene: Leila is naked and cut and fallen at Millie's feet. In her intervention at the story's close, it is tempting perhaps to see Millie as filling the triangulating role (classically reserved for the father) of separator who urges differentiation by beckoning the daughter away from the mother. And yet this is not quite the case because although Millie does draw Leila further away from Bonnie Murray's awful fate, Millie is also conflated earlier in the text with "a mother. [...with] "my mother," says Leila (*SR* 184). What this conflation I think provides for, symbolically at least, is Leila's psychic opening out toward the social *without* the oedipally mandated disavowal of the maternal. Kasischke's masochistic trauma narrative opens finally and most affirmatively, then, toward the potentiality for healing and for rebirth into a new, protective and utopically-inflected female sociality wherein the mother is not given up but remains symbolically extant. In *The Hysteric's Guide to the Future Female Subject*, MacCannell laments that no feminism she knows of "has taken the lead on the question regarding a maternal relation to ethics" (155). It seems to me that in some measure at least *Suspicious River* takes this feminist "lead" by having Leila embrace the figure of Millie, the figure (to use MacCannell's terms) of an "ethical female subject, who would include mothering within her range of possibilities" (154).

Conclusion

As a conclusion to this chapter I would like to point to Luce Irigaray whose philosophical interest in the creation of "a loving [feminine] ethics" (*An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 103) resonates decidedly both with MacCannell's recent revisionist psychoanalytic theorizings and with *Suspicious River*'s closing scenes as well. Irigaray's position is that "*love among women*" is a "configuration" remaining "in latency, in [cultural] abeyance" (102). For Irigaray, women remain sexual rivals with no symbolic identity of their own. In order for "a loving ethics" to take place among women, contends Irigaray, women "need language, some language" of their own (107). "A symbolism," she writes, "has to be created among women if love among them is to take place. [...if they are to act and to] take part in the divine becoming" (104-06). Irigaray in addition says that this "world" of female ethics must have both "vertical and horizontal dimensions" (108). What Irigaray means is that the creation of a loving female community rests both upon diachronic representations of the mother-daughter relationship and also upon synchronic representations of women's relation to their female peers. Irigaray's philosophic concerns, I am arguing then, find considerable novelistic support in Kasischke's literary text. Irigaray and Kasischke both seek the expansion of the feminine imaginary and symbolic, and both furthermore see the coming into being of a new ethics as a necessarily social process that includes the mother. *Suspicious River*, with its stress upon language, upon maternal enunciation, and upon the inauguration of a new feminine iconography extending from the past and through into an implied future ("my mother […] world without end. […] Millie glows […] I remember being touched"), speaks indeed I think provocatively to Irigaray's theoretical address.

The utopian transformations Kasischke envisions, then, express the affirmative potentiality of psychosocial change. Her disturbing trauma narrative has much to say not only about female masochism, hysteria, and abjection, but also about the possibility of redirecting or resisting some of the painful effects of the above, interrelated formations. In *Suspicious River*, Leila performs her own abasement and she uses self-mutilation to express both the catastrophe of maternal separation as well as the violence and repression of institutional sociosexual domination. But Kasischke also has Leila go beyond degradation in order to begin to trace a new feminine ethics. In this sense, *Suspicious River* is a liberatory text in which the disarticulated feminine body becomes a paradoxical figure of possible affiliation.

Notes

1. Kirsty Gunn is an emerging commonwealth writer. *The Keepsake*, Gunn's second novel published in 1997 a year following Kasischke's book, has remarkable parallels to *Suspicious River*. *The Keepsake* depicts the transgenerational victimization of a mother and a daughter, and like *Suspicious River*, the fiction explores traumatic, hysterical repetition in highly poetic prose. In reading Gunn's work, I am struck also by the similarities to Marguerite Duras's writing (I am thinking of *The Lover* as well as *La Douleur*) which thematizes masochistic sexuality as well as being-for-death, and which furthermore imagines loss as the defining psychic human experience. *The Keepsake* (and Duras's fiction also) is a textual indicator perhaps that the figuring of the wound as the locus of the subject is manifest in the contemporary literary scene transcontinentally. See the Conclusion of this dissertation for further discussion of Gunn's *The Keepsake*.

2. I borrow this phrase from Juliet Flower MacCannell who uses it throughout *The Hysteric's Guide to the Future Female Subject*, where she discusses the future possibility of a female subject not mired in a Sadean ethics of unlimited self-fulfillment, but in fact assuming a social role with attendant social responsibilities.

3. In *The Return of the Real*, Hal Foster (as mentioned briefly in this dissertation's Introduction) argues that contemporary traumatic visual realism or abject art "is drawn to the broken boundaries of the violated body" and ultimately toward the nihility of the corpse (152). *Suspicious River*, with its focus upon the maternal corpse as the point of subjective identification, has, I think, certain affiliations with neo-avant-garde artistic practice (and the quest for the real) as outlined by Foster.

4. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva speaks of the "erotic cult of the abject" and of the "eroticization of abjection," which she explicitly links to the "joy in" bodily fluids, flows, and discharges, as well as to the subject's *introjection* of the mother (54-55).

5. Cixous, as I have mentioned, is notable for her discussion of the importance of the mother's voice and also for her embrace of the hysteric's insurgent language. However, Kaja Silverman in her book *Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* offers a more extensive and trenchant consideration of the complex ways in which "the maternal voice represent[s] […a cultural] stress point" and is persistently present cinematically (and psychoanalytically) as "metaphoric excess" (75, 77). In her discussion of Kristeva's theoretical texts "Stabat Mater," "Place Names," and "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini," Silverman contends that the "negation of the mother's discursive role is part of a larger refusal to assign the female subject a viable place within the symbolic" (105). Silverman nonetheless argues that "the maternal imago" occupies a "central place […] within the construction of female subjectivity" (135). Her analysis of filmic female silencing and of the problematic surrounding the female voice could be fruitfully read in relation to Kasischke's novel.

6. In Volume I of the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Freud writes that the "mechanism of poetry is the same as that of hysterical phantasies" (256).

7. "Hysterical narrative" is a genre Elaine Showalter in her 1997 publication, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture*, isolates and discusses as one among various expressions of the current sociocultural fixation upon trauma (81). In part, her book examines the rise of hysteria as "narrative practice" but cautions against what she sees as "the feminist embrace of all abuse narratives." "Claiming hysteria and admiring its victims," she claims, "may have had inspirational functions [...]. But Saint Dora's days are over. Today feminists need models rather than martyrs" (61). Showalter touches upon a sensitive area of feminist scholarship that questions whether representations of female victimization and abjection are politically useful or merely perpetuate violence against women. The novels I consider in this dissertation present abasement largely I think for political purpose. As I argue throughout the dissertation, in different ways, each author of study attempts to write through the negative toward some form of transformation and change.

8. In her book *Counterpleasures*, Karmen MacKendrick carefully distinguishes between masochistic and sadistic narrative by going to the literary sources of these forms in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and de Sade's texts respectively. One of her suggestions is that both genres are "preoccupied with the death instinct" and incorporate "boundary play," but that Sadean fiction "attempts to maximize violence in both intensity and iteration," whereas masochistic narrative violence "is much more limited" (57, 58, 61).

9. In the February 1997 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Lee Siegel in an article entitled "De Sade's Daughters" reviews *Suspicious River* in addition to other transgressive books by American women authors like A. M. Holmes's *The End of Alice* and Louise Erdrich's *Tales of Burning Love*. Siegel condemns these texts and writers for their "depredations against inner life" and for their reductions of sexuality into "bland issues of power" (102, 100). He also remarks incorrectly that Leila's first-person testimonial of "her own murder at the end of the novel [...] throws into doubt, to put it mildly, the entire novel's credibility" (100). Contrary to Siegel's account, Leila is painfully wounded but nonetheless alive at the fiction's close.

10. *Chora* is a term Kristeva uses *à la* Plato to refer to the child's libidinal condition of presymbolic union with the mother in early life. Kristeva also identifies the *chora* with semiotic (poetic) language that threatens the proper linguistic order of the symbolic. In this latter sense, the term is perhaps appropriate to my discussion of how Bonnie Murray's phantasmatic voice urges alternatives and poses thereby a fundamental challenge to the dominant order. However, given the term's Kristevean association with infantile psychic life, I hesitate to use it given my argument that Kasischke's protagonist moves toward separate selfhood without disavowing or disengaging from the maternal. See Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* for her view of the meaning of the semiotic and of the *chora*. See also Kaja Silverman's

Acoustic Mirror (pages 101-09) for her concise understanding of these challenging Kristevean concepts.

11. Cathy Caruth is not the only traumatologist to explore the meaning of the voice for the victimized. In her book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry also considers the importance of the voice (specifically its restoration) for physically devastated political prisoners. Scarry says that one of torture's mechanisms is "to deconstruct the prisoner's voice" (to "unmake" the world) by focusing all mental attention upon the abused body (20). Conversely, "the most powerful and healing moment" (the moment of "remaking"), argues Scarry, often comes when "a human voice [...] floating free, somehow reaches the person whose sole reality had become his own unthinkable isolation, his deep corporeal engulfment" (50). In *Suspicious River*, Leila is reduced to a body in pain, to the kind of radical "corporeal engulfment" about which Scarry writes. However, by reaching through the imaginary toward her mother's voice the moment of restoration begins and Leila discovers, to borrow Scarry's terms, a new "locus of power" (51).

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CHAPTER TWO:

Toward a New Feminine Ethic: Abjection, Trauma, and Revolt in Darcey Steinke's *Jesus Saves*

Introduction

Like Laura Kasischke in *Suspicious River*, Darcey Steinke in *Jesus Saves* is drawn toward figures of trauma. Like Kasischke, Steinke also considers how we might recover from traumatic loss and violence, and specifically how women might become active agents of revolt in what Steinke depicts as a sacrificial and pornographic social order that secures its symbolism chiefly through the figure of the wounded feminine body. Kasischke's and Steinke's books reveal preoccupations in fact remarkably similar: both novelists investigate violence against women, both explore traumatic repetition and mimesis, both depict marginal feminine spaces as well as unspeakable states of female abjection, both allegorize the loss of the mother's body, and both, furthermore, stage the girl or the woman's confrontation with the pervert or sadist. More positively, both texts also account for more than women's victimization, loss, and despair by articulating the possibility of escape as well as the potentiality for feminine solidarity. In other words, contrary to many recent theorizations about traumatic inevitability or necessity, both Steinke and Kasischke view trauma not necessarily as something devastatingly unredressable, but in fact as remediable, even if only partially or ambiguously.

In both the thesis Introduction and in the previous chapter, I cite Juliet Flower MacCannell as one of the theoretical reference points for investigating wound culture generally and *Suspicious River* more specifically. In this chapter, I look more closely at MacCannell's *The Hysteric's Guide*, paying specific attention to her chapter entitled "The

Soul of Woman Under Sadism," in order to articulate more incisively what Steinke's *Jesus Saves* might be revealing about contemporary female experience. Apart from MacCannell's psychoanalytic theories and her ideological critiques concerning "the girl in a sadistic age" (xv), I turn briefly also to Martha J. Reineke's feminist theories on violence and sacrifice, to Barbara Whitmer's sociological theories on traumatic repetition and mimesis, and to Mark Seltzer's cultural theories on wounding and abjection in order to help fully illuminate Steinke's complex fiction. Although I examine diverse theoretical material, I do so in recognition of an overlapping discourse pointing pervasively to the contemporary trauma of the subject. Moreover, I contend that the interrelations among theorists becomes clearer in the light of Steinke's creative work, which in fact intricately combines themes of sadism, abjection, sacrifice, traumatic repetition, and violence. The first part of this chapter, then, briefly outlines the critical inquiries of Seltzer, Whitmer, Reineke, and MacCannell in order to broaden my interpretive frame by shaping interrogative parameters that will enable a deep understanding of the themes and questions raised in *Jesus Saves*. My thesis is that while Steinke's fiction represents the world as horrific, violent, and vile, it tries nonetheless to step beyond that vision of the world toward a "feminine ethic" that might counter the presently sadistic one with a new (albeit, vaguely glimpsed) model of caring and allegiance between women. The theory of change envisioned in *Jesus Saves* recognizes, I argue furthermore, that although transformation begins on the level of fantasy or of the imaginary, it nonetheless necessitates physical action as well.

Part 1: Some Contemporary Theories on Violence, Sacrifice, Trauma, and Abjection

Despite the diverse philosophical backgrounds of the theorists I mention above, they are all united in their recent attempts to theorize or to offer some critique of the violence and brutality of contemporary culture. Although the language they use is different, each theorist nonetheless sets out to investigate contemporary "wound culture" to give prominence to Seltzer's taxonomical designation for the violence of our current cultural moment. For MacCannell, Western wound culture has a chiefly *sadistic* character, for Reineke, a *sacrificial* one, and, in different ways, for both Seltzer and Whitmer, wound culture is experienced primarily as *traumatic*. Beginning with a brief review of Seltzer's notion that our culture is one "of suffering and wounded attachments" ("WC" 4), and moving on to a discussion of Whitmer's account of our "addiction to violence" in "an age of the victimizer/victim" (*The Violence Mythos* 3), this section of the chapter ends with a consideration of how both MacCannell and Reineke bring feminist perspectives to the debate about violence.

To review briefly, for Mark Seltzer, in contemporary society "the very notion of sociality is bound to the excitations of the torn and open body, the torn and exposed individual as public spectacle" ("WC" 3-4). In Seltzer's view, within this "sociality premised on the wound" or premised upon abjection many people identify with the hurt bodies or damaged psyches of others to the extent that they bend "event-reference," as Seltzer puts it, to "self-reference" in a "pathological" process of "mimetic identification intensified to the point of reproduction" ("WC" 11, 8). As Seltzer explains it in different terms, in postmodernity many of us experience "a collapse of proper boundary maintenance" and fail to distinguish between the private and public, between "inner and outer, observer and scene" to the point of vicarious traumatization and symbolic modeling ("WC" 21). Seltzer links wound culture explicitly to the notion of trauma suggesting that the latter has become "a flash point [...] of locating the subject," or more specifically, of locating "a fundamental *breakdown* in the autonomy of the subject" ("WC" 4, 10). Trauma, in Seltzer's understanding, is "first, the wound [...and] second, a wounding in the absence of a wound: trauma is in effect an effect in search of a cause" ("WC" 8).

While Seltzer adopts a relatively neutral view of the development and rise of wound culture, Barbara Whitmer is more skeptical of what she views as the "systemic cultural [valuation and] legitimation of violence" (*The Violence Mythos* 16). Whitmer casts a critical eye not only on the damaging effects on the lives of those who make traumatic identifications, but also on what she evaluates as an abusive culture that promotes "a victim-victimizer dynamic in expected social practice" (54). Part of Whitmer's project is the consideration of trauma's devastating psychological effects: she mentions purposeful distanciation (of the mind from the body or, more generally, of the subject from the symbolic order), psychic numbing, emotional constriction, traumatic repetition, and also a sense of one's own lack of being as the various compensatory means of dealing with unresolved trauma content. Linking Whitmer and Seltzer, however, is their shared discussion of the mimetic properties of violence and trauma, or of the ways in which violence elaborates and extends itself in the social domain. Outlining a historically extensive model of trauma transference, Whitmer emphasizes that traumatic experience finds expression in the "compulsion to repeat" not only for the individual but also within transgenerational contexts. Following René Girard's[1] early sociological work on scapegoating, sacrifice, and mimetic violence, Whitmer points to the "mimetic dimension of human behavior and its ability to produce cultural forms" (126). She contends that traumatic content may be mimetically reproduced and speaks in this regard not specifically of wound culture, but closely of the sociohistorical construction of symbolic models of trauma transference. Notably, Cathy Caruth, whose work I discuss briefly in the preceding chapter, also discusses trauma's reproducibility arguing that we can view "traumatic experience [...] as the enigma of a human agent's repeated acts," and that we can envision trauma "in individual and collective history" (*Unclaimed Experience* 3, 4). Caruth argues, furthermore, that trauma narratives give "enigmatic testimony [...] to the nature of violent events," and like Seltzer, she sees our era as a "catastrophic" one characterized by the "widespread and bewildering encounter with trauma" (*Unclaimed* 12, 11).

In her book *Sacrificed Lives: Kristeva on Women and Violence*, Martha J. Reineke also contributes to the philosophical debate on the question of contemporary violence. Speaking of how the violent incidents of our culture are not "isolated acts" but rather "systematically constituted," and also of how "forms of cultural disorder" take their toll on the human body (4), Reineke's comments resonate with Whitmer's and Seltzer's respective assertions concerning the "systemic cultural legitimation of violence" (*VM* 16) and the existence of a "pathological public sphere" fixated upon signs of the wound ("WC" 9). What Reineke brings to the discourse on wound culture, however, is a feminist viewpoint that questions what "accounts for [...the female body's] privileged violation" in an abusive culture (3). "I want to learn," Reineke writes, "how paralysis becomes a way of life for so many women, radically occluding their agency" (3). Invoking the notion of a sacrificial economy to explain violence against women, Reineke considers various sacrificial feminine tropes (predominantly the mystic, the witch, and the mother) in an effort to evaluate western cultural misogyny. Reineke asserts: "Feminist theorists who seek to understand [...violent, contemporary] culture in order to intervene on behalf of women's agency should not relegate sacrifice to societies inventoried by nineteenth-century European scholars in their grand theories of religion. Feminist theorists should invoke sacrifice [and its attendant themes of *substitutionary violence*] as powerfully instructive metaphors for analyses of women's lives" (5). For Reineke, moreover, we should not only document the "constraints exerted on women in a sacrificial economy, but we should also investigate prospects for women's release from those bonds" (50). Reineke speaks optimistically of the creation of an "emancipating grammar" and of "possibilities for nonsacrificial arrangements supportive of women's enhanced agency" (50). And she believes additionally that by recognizing the self as other, "we can begin to [move beyond the confines of a sacrificial economy and] chart anew the agency of our lives" (187).

MacCannell is in many regards similarly concerned both with social violence and with restoring agency to the feminine subject. I have saved for last a review of MacCannell because her theories about our contemporary situation, about what she views as our sadistic age, have been especially influential on my reading of Steinke's *Jesus Saves*. In ways that the other theorists I cite do not, MacCannell pays serious attention to the effect of social violence and obscenity specifically on the figure of the girl. MacCannell states her intention clearly in the following comment: "I aim at a possible or potentially *free female subject*—her logic, her ethic, her unconscious. I find her potential in *the girl* who is not yet captured by patriarchal narratives of feminine submission and resistance, or by a symbolic politics of desire and loss, or by twisted capitalist, colonialist, or fascist ideologies of fulfillment" (xii). MacCannell's emphasis on the girl is significant because Steinke (and Acker and Kasischke as well) is similarly drawn toward the girl (or young woman) as a figure of potential agency and freedom. Steinke shares with MacCannell, in other words, the fact that she too places her hope for the future on the feminine, on the figure of the girl or the young woman.

In the Introduction to this thesis I noted MacCannell's acknowledgement of Sade as "the original voice calling for an emancipation of the self," and challenging "singularly the right to existence of a feminine subject in the name of absolute sexual equality" (xii, xiii). However, while MacCannell praises Sade for imagining sexual freedom for women, she states ambivalently that she is also "trying to undo Sade" and his "fundamental skepticism concerning a difference between the sexes" (xvii). MacCannell writes: "There is [...] something not right with a politics and an ideology rooted in a perverse call to absolute freedom" (xiv). In her view, what is "not right" with Sade's vision is that it does not allow the girl to become a woman capable of entering "the body politic." The Sadean girl remains in a hysterical position (with no clearly sexed identity) and she "need never," states MacCannell, "contribute to the public sphere as long as she achieves freedom, equality, and fraternity within [...Sade's] bedroom walls" (27). Although she pays no explicit homage to Luce Irigaray, many of MacCannell's arguments concerning the necessary construction of an "ethics of sexuality" against a purely Sadean ethic of unlimited *jouissance* are in fact reminiscent of Irigaray's radical feminist elaborations upon an "ethic of sexual difference." Both writers advocate the creation of a clearly sexed feminine identity with attendant social responsibilities, with "some responsibility toward a society that requires certain things of certain sexes," as MacCannell puts it (32).

MacCannell acknowledges that "few women will be entirely happy with [...her] approach" (xv). And certainly in relation to many contemporary feminists who reject "good-woman modes of thought" in clear favor of "perverse pleasures for perverse subjects" (Karmen MacKendrick 17, 11), or who point to "the important transgressive role of [...] perversions in undoing rigid hierarchies that underlie sexual difference" (Linda Williams, "Pornographies on/scene" 234), MacCannell appears primly to lean toward a social-sexual conservatism. Nonetheless, MacCannell does have important things to say about the ways in which the "sadistic dimension is now front and center" and about what this means for the girl (20). Declaring that, "[w]oman is no longer what she once seemed to be—not after Sade. She cannot be made to go back to some time before," and that, "The answer for the girl is not traditional patriarchy," MacCannell might appear cautionary but she is certainly not reactionary (xiii, 34). We "need more analysis," she heeds, "not just a supportive or confirming philosophy" (30).

Although MacCannell does not want the girl to lose "whatever portion of freedom" Sade has won for her, she does want the girl to break with Sade, who, says MacCannell, appears in the contemporary form of "the pervert" promising *jouissance*. Today, argues MacCannell, the pervert is for the girl the "obscene Thing" that stirs her. She writes: "now, as part of the girl's logical structure, the most important relation for her sexual life today is to the pervert, and not to her Mother or her Father. [...] The pervert

[…] represents a 'total man' to the […girl] who finds the Oedipal man ridiculous: he shapes her dreams " (18-19). It is the pervert, furthermore, "the girl must break with to win her womanhood" (to access her "womanliness, her enjoyment, her culture, her sexuality, and her politics in *her* own way"), and to begin to practice a new ethic of social responsibility (20, xiii). MacCannell also contends that it is through "*the word*," through literature written by those "who have withstood the inducements of Sade," that this "break" with the pervert or this "exit from Sade's bedroom" might be revealed (33, 34). She mentions the texts both of Marguerite Duras and Maya Angelou (among others) as prime examples of literature in search of this break and motivated "to go beyond certain limits in order to re-mark again the limits of the human, to refind what of the human remains after a certain limit has been surpassed" (11).

Part 2: Abjection, Trauma, And Revolt in *Jesus Saves*

Darcey Steinke, I think, could be included among the writers that MacCannell celebrates as going "beyond certain limits" to find openings that have been foreclosed to Sadean woman. Steinke, to borrow MacCannell's terms in her discussion of Duras, "questions our feminine 'imprisonment' by the 'liberated' [Sadean] viewpoint […]. We can watch her at work, freeing the aesthetic character, [attempting to free…] the girl" (261). The remainder of this chapter will explore precisely how Steinke gives creative voice to some of the theoretical issues addressed by MacCannell, and in the process it will suggest the manner in which fiction and theory in a sense clarify and amplify one another. It will show that although Steinke is not explicitly concerned with the question of sexual difference, like MacCannell, Steinke explores deeply "the sadism roaming at large in the land today," and she exposes, moreover, how "[l]ike all pornography," the sadistic scene touches the girl "at the core" (MacCannell 10, 26). MacCannell's thesis, as we have seen, is that the "obscene figure with which the girl [today] contends is not maternal but sadistic" (11). In *Jesus Saves*, Steinke in fact allegorizes just such an encounter between the girl and the pervert or sadist, and she aims furthermore to write *through* this encounter, to write through sadism and toward "a possible or potentially *free female subject*" (MacCannell xii). In the pages that follow I will also show that Steinke is similarly intellectually aligned with the other theorists I discuss above. Like Seltzer, for instance, Steinke often views the subject in terms of his or her "wounded attachments," as fixated upon signs and figures of the wound. Like Whitmer as well Steinke explores trauma's mimetic dimensions. And finally, like Reineke, she reveals in *Jesus Saves* the ways in which sacrifice is a practice that is alive and well in the world today, and performed primarily on the female body. In other words, as Steinke makes markedly clear, the body today is sacrificial, and the female body is the symbolic site of choice, the scapegoated site of loss, upon which contemporary sacrificial formations are enacted.

By setting *Jesus Saves* in the suburban underbelly of an anonymous American community, Darcey Steinke suggests that the violent events, rapes, and woundings she depicts might happen anywhere, that they are signs of an extensive social phenomenon or larger national catastrophe. The fact that her text alternates between two dominant female perspectives—one belonging to seventeen year old Ginger, the local Lutheran minister's troubled daughter, and the other to Sandy Patrick, a younger local girl abducted from summer camp and abused until her death by an unnamed pedophile—emphasizes in a different way how the individual, private story traces perhaps a more collective and political narrative. Apart from the opening three chapters reflecting Ginger's consciousness, *Jesus Saves* systematically alternates chapter-by-chapter between the two female protagonists' narratives, and suggests thereby the interconnection between one girl's life and the other's death. *Jesus Saves* shows, in other words, that trauma (to borrow from Cathy Caruth) can be seen both as "the encounter with death, [...and] the ongoing experience of having survived it" (*Unclaimed* 7).

In *Jesus Saves*, Steinke places her two young, female protagonists in a symbolic suburban wasteland, and she illuminates all its darkest and most perverse corners. Employing a form of urban realism to document life for the girl in contemporary society, and offering an unflinching look into the profanation, debasement, and pornography of our surroundings, one of Steinke's themes is the wearing away of the spirit in the face of close, daily confrontations with the "obscene Thing." In Steinke's novel, the geographical scene—the pre-fabricated subdivisions, the McDonalds, the Burger Kings, the x rated theatres, the plethora of pornographic video stores, and the general downtown urban inner city decay—both accentuates the vacuity of the times and informs the novel's sense of spiritual panic.

Steinke's work offers a stark apprehension not only of a demoralized American urban cityscape, but also of a corresponding collapse of the social, a collapse of what MacCannell calls the "'symbolic seeming,' whose shelter the girl once sought" (20). This weakening of the symbolic order is apparent in numerous narrative details, for instance, in Ginger's assessment of the commodification and profanation of her father's Lutheran ministry by a business man named Mulhoffer, who wants to see Christianity evolve into something entertaining and economically profitable. Throughout *Jesus Saves* Ginger thinks with regret and dismay about the cost-effective move from the old downtown Lutheran church to the new church near the interstate, designed "by the same person who built the mall" and "generic as an airport" (179, 19). On another occasion she expresses disillusionment with her father's cheapening of the sacrament, in which he uses Manischewitz wine (the preferred beverage, thinks Ginger, of "Downtown, homeless men" who drink it out of "wrinkled brown bags" [75]) to symbolize Christ's blood. In an additional passage, Ginger comments explicitly on the growing insignificance of Christian ritual: when she sees a mutilated cardinal in the woods, "its belly split to expose shiny red innards," Ginger, Steinke writes, "felt a dreamy reverence because the Protestant ritual of wine and water was wearing out. The dead bird's nightmarish holiness demanded silence" (165, 166). In passages like the one above, Steinke reveals how traditional religious forms have been reduced to relative insignificance and no longer hold meaning for the subject. She also shows her protagonist in search of something beyond the old symbolic rituals, in creative search of new, more directly gratifying spiritual experiences. In his book *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard argues that when "the religious framework of a society starts to totter," that society can be seen as experiencing a "sacrificial crisis" in which not only do traditional sacrificial forms disintegrate and lose their meaning, but also "institutions lose their vitality; the protective façade of the society gives way [...], and the whole cultural structure seems on the verge of collapse" (49). *Jesus Saves*, I argue, portrays a "crisis" much like the one Girard theorizes. Steinke's novel partly deals, in other words, with the social-spiritual order in apparent decay, and furthermore shows the individual attempting to take ritual into his or her own hands.[2]

Other narrative details are suggestive as well in the above context. For instance, indicating the decline of the social in *Jesus Saves* is the nature of the "secret information" Ginger's father's parishioners confide to him and which he in turn confides to Ginger about, "Mrs. Hofner, who told everyone her husband died of a heart attack, [but who] had actually nudged an electric radio into his hot bath; or [about] the Koenigs, whose eldest son hung himself in the backyard wearing his sister's prom dress and [about] the Robertson newlyweds, who got involved with cocaine and kinky sex and were still in a detox center in West Virginia" (70-71). As Steinke makes clear through passages like the one above, and I quote from MacCannnell, the "illusion of the symbolic seeming, which sustains the moral order as we once construed it, has been pretty well taken down for the girl" (25). Society's unseemly underbelly or its dissolution reveals itself more directly to Ginger in the surrealist downtown core where fires blaze out of chemical canisters, and where the x rated theatre looks on significantly "with sly mastery" at the boarded-up, padlocked, and graffiti tagged church across the street (70). "A couple of naked dolls," Steinke writes, "hung in the bushes under the boarded-up windows of the church; hair cropped with blunt children's scissors, their fat bellies streaked with mud" (147).

The preceding representation of the naked and damaged dolls is alarming not only because of its repetition in *Jesus Saves*,[3] but also given its ubiquitous presence in other contemporary American women's artistic productions—notably in Courtney Love's alternative song "Doll Parts," in Cindy Sherman's avant-garde "Sex Pictures," and also in

Kathy Acker's novel *In Memoriam to Identity*. In different ways, Love, Sherman, and Acker each use the image of the mutilated, brutalized, or grotesque doll as a figure for the contemporary trauma of the female subject.[4] Steinke uses the representation of the hanging dolls in a similar manner to signify both the vulnerability and sacrifice of the feminine in a violent culture. In fact, Steinke explicitly associates her female characters with the text's doll imagery. Following her abduction, Sandy Patrick, for instance, imagines herself "as a figurine left under a doll house bed," and another unnamed girl abductee is described through her caricatured, doll-like appearance: the girl, Steinke writes, "wore her mother's oversized raincoat and a pair of electric blue pumps. Foundation streaked down her check, silver eye shadow glittered under her brow, and on each cheek was a heavy spot of sparkling rouge" (63, 148).

Jesus Saves's doll imagery joins with other images of the wounded or traumatic female body to form a larger constellation of troubling representations of the brutalized feminine. For instance, the girl in the electric blue pumps appears earlier in the novel as tearful, "mascara smeared," and "coiled under [...an] army blanket" in a man's bedroom, "that reeked of come and blood" (109). The disquietingly violent suggestiveness of the previous representation is paralleled more concretely in Ginger's many recollections of missing girls, of raped girls, and of a tattooed "dead girl [...] found floating in the man-made lake. [...her] mushy water-soaked skin broke[n] apart like wet paper" (6). It is paralleled also in the frequent and sustained vignettes of Sandy Patrick's tortured and dying body, and in her kidnapper's chilling assertion that porn "magazines are filled with girls and no one seems to realize you can take one whenever you want" (119).

One of the things that *Jesus Saves* sets out precisely to question is the effect on the girl of living in such a violent and pornographic culture in which the law of the father neither holds much moral sway nor offers much protection. Steinke, in fact, points directly to the girl's sense of vulnerability and insecurity when she has Ginger think to herself that "[m]aybe it was in the pestiferous nature of the ministry, maybe the lack of imperatives in the spiritual life, but even as a little girl [...her father] never made her feel safe" (182). The increasing obscenity in the world today (the stories of murders, abductions, and rapes that *Jesus Saves* documents) coupled with the worn-out patriarchy that no longer provides much "shelter" cause Ginger intense apprehension, as evidenced in the following early passage, which I quote from at length:

> Lately her nervous system seemed like the control center of her body, anxiety shot through her, made her heart pound and the baby hairs stand straight on the nape of her neck. Maybe it was all the talk about the serial killer captured a few weeks back, how he kept chopped up human bodies carefully wrapped in butcher's paper in his basement freezer. Every day you heard about another grisly murder, and there were always mug shots on the news of the dead-eyed perpetrators and blurry snapshots of their victims smiling on Florida vacations or standing near a Christmas tree. Worry, like cornsmut boils, had grown along the ridges of Ginger's brain until she suspected her body ran on fear alone. She had the bad habit of chewing her cuticles, peeling strips of opaque flesh around the fingernails, and lately she slept only intermittently, jolted awake by every truck on the highway. (5-6)

Not only does Steinke explore the damaging emotional effects of living in a sadistic age, but additionally she explores the complex relation of the girl to her own sexuality in a culture of obscenity. During the course of *Jesus Saves* we see Ginger in two intimate sex scenes. In the first, she "helped herself along," as Steinke puts it, "by thinking of the girl she'd seen in a porno magazine with a shaved pussy and then of certain parts of the Manson book" (37). In the second sexual episode, Ginger's boyfriend Ted performs oral sex on her as she watches "how he moved his head like a dog drinks. And this thought was the raft that floated her over to pleasure" (124). The reference in the first scene to Charles Manson, probably the most notorious sexual sadist of the 20th century, underscores how the sadistic ideal of cruelty and unlimited enjoyment has been internalized by Ginger, and has influenced her sexuality. In the first sex scene, Ginger enjoys the thought of her own degradation; in the second, when she thinks of her boyfriend as a dog, she pleasures in the thought of his humiliation as well. Although different in terms of the power relations envisioned, both of Ginger's fantasies reveal an inner violence, they relate sex to suffering or debasement, and they mark, as MacCannell might say, places "Sade has […] been" (xiii). Although Steinke portrays Sadean woman in passages like the ones above, one of her cardinal aims in *Jesus Saves*, as we shall see, is to expose the real horrors of violent desire and, to quote again from MacCannell, to move decisively away from an "ethics" of sexuality "mired in Sadean desire" (xix).

In *Jesus Saves*, it is most provocatively through the story of Sandy Patrick's abduction and abjection that Steinke both displays and defetishizes sadistic violence, cruelty, and sacrifice. Sandy Patrick is first mentioned in *Jesus Saves* in the first chapter through Ginger's recollection of Sandy's missing person status, and of the "underexposed

Polaroid" found in a convenience store parking lot in the next state showing Sandy "lying on a mattress, her arms tied behind her back, black electrical tape sealing her mouth" (6). The next reference to Sandy occurs in Ginger's father's Sunday sermon in which he both recounts his horrifying dream of being Sandy Patrick's kidnapper, and provides a troubling and, to his listeners, gratuitous portrayal of her bodily humiliation and decay. Drawing attention to her "white bloodless feet and purple toenails [...] ankles bound with polyester cord," the minister imagines Sandy lying "on the cold metal floor" of a van, her flesh "so pale it glowed a fuzzy blue and seemed to hover in the dark" (20-21). In the minister's strange account, the "bruised" and "ruined face [...of] Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior" is conflated with Sandy's debased body, and the congregation is asked to remember the girl "in an aura of divine light" (21-22). During his sermon, the minister goes on to pose the following questions: "Could I be complicit in something as macabre as the abduction of Sandy Patrick? [...] can this sensitive girl be a suitable stand in for Christ?" (21). To the congregation's "outrage" and "indignation," Ginger's father answers in the affirmative, pointing to a general social responsibility for evil and contending that the "evil power that abducted Sandy is not just the exception to the rule but rather part of the fabric of human reality [...] which we cannot cast off" (22). The sermon ends finally with the minister framing Sandy's kidnapping explicitly in the language of symbolic (or, to use Reineke's terms, "substitutionary") sacrifice by praying "that her pain [...] not be wasted, that [...] it [...] work as an elixir, just as Christ's blood does in communion, to turn our black hearts pure and white" (22). By suggesting the symbolic similarity between Sandy Patrick and Christ as trauma savior, the minister both places the girl's abuse within a Christian ritual framework and implies her sacred character as a victim. While the minister tries, then, to emphasize the larger social culpability for violence, equivocally he also idealizes the wounded or sacrificed body as public spectacle. Girard writes that the purpose of "sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric" (*Violence* 8). Seltzer, as we have seen, argues similarly that our culture is characterized by a "sociality premised on the wound." Like both Girard and Seltzer in some ways, Steinke's minister points to the socially functional aspects of violence and wound culture.

While *Jesus Saves*'s early pages point rhetorically to the socially curative aspects of Sandy Patrick's death by indicating a correlation between the public consumption of her suffering and the diffusion of social violence and aggression, most of the other later passages focusing on the girl offer a much more interior, private, and de-romanticized view of the pain of victimization. Through a third person voice reflecting Sandy Patrick's thoughts, we learn intimately what it might be like to be a brutalized abductee, to be a slowly dying young body, and to be the unfortunate object of a pedophile's lust. The picture we are presented with is nothing less than unspeakable. As the novel progresses, the series of seedy images surrounding Sandy's abuse become increasingly horrific and almost unbearable to read. Through the recounting of Sandy's experience, the traumatic and sadistic elements of her debasement by "the troll," as Sandy thinks of her abductor, come to the fore. In one scene, Sandy's kidnapper incoherently describes himself to the girl as "anonpersontryingtobereal," in other words, as a marginalized human being trying to establish his subjecthood (156). As Steinke shows throughout the abduction story, the kidnapper establishes his own self at the cost of the other, sadistically at the girl's ultimate expense. In many ways, Sandy's actual imprisonment and deterioration at the troll's hands parallel the minister's imagined representation of her. We often see Sandy restrained on a bare mattress in the back of a van, and there are depictions of "her bound ankles, pale blood-starved feet, the toenails like lavender shells," recalling Christ's ruined feet (51).

However, the reality of Sandy's experience is much more despicable and painful than the minister dreams or virtualizes it to be. Not only is she bound, she is also drugged, beaten, gagged, silenced, and also infantalized by being made to wear diapers as a sign of her regression as a human being. She is degraded verbally, called "a stupid bitch," "a *little monkey girl*," and "*Little Miss Nobody*" (67, 171, 176). The young girl is forced furthermore to engage in various sex acts, including an act of fellatio in which she thinks of her abductor as a "worm [...straining] to multiply" as his "pelvis cracked against her skull" (117). Sexually molested and brutalized, Sandy imagines that "Inside [...the troll's] pants is a monster [...] a sea lamprey, a mollusk, a carnivorous plant that loved flesh and bled curdled cream" (95, 156). Her many humiliations lead her to see herself as becoming smaller, "tiny as an origami bird made from delicate silver paper. [...] tiny as a figurine left under a doll house bed" (54, 63). Her "brain," she imagines went sliding backwards, dissolving" (176). On another occasion following one of the early sexual abuse scenes, Sandy feels consumed by her abductor; "she felt," writes Steinke, "like he'd swallowed her whole, that her body floated in his dark stomach along with the lumps of chewed-up chicken in a lake full of beer" (57). Not only does Sandy experience self-abjection, self-loss, and mental deterioration, but also during the course of her trauma she declines physically as well. Although the troll does feed her—"soft carrots, potatoes, translucent onions, bits of greyish meat in a room-temperature gravy"—

Sandy's "feeding time" comes sporadically, sometimes days apart, so that the girl feels "it in the hollow of her bones" (55, 57). Near her death her stomach has shrunk "to the size of a kidney bean," and she is repulsed by one of her last meals, in which she sees "what looked like cat's-eye marbles, limp crickets, and furry spiders' legs floating like junk in the tomato sauce" (157, 156). Noting that disgust by "an item of food [....] is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection," Kristeva's association of food loathing and the experience of abjection is well known. Although Kristeva suggests that food revulsion is an indication, as she puts it, of the "'I' [...] becoming" (*Powers* 3), Sandy Patrick's intensifying food loathing is different in that it signals quite the opposite: it signals the self beset by its own abjection. In other words, it signifies not the "'I' claim[ing] to establish" itself as Kristeva might suggest (*Powers* 3), but rather the "I" provocatively disclaiming itself to the point of accepting the dissolution of the body in death.

Other textual passages reveal how Sandy imagines herself increasingly as a non-subject. For instance, at the end of her ordeal and near her death, her mind on many occasions becomes disconnected from her body, and she views herself both objectively and sadly in the third person as "the little monkey, skinny as a pencil and covered with black and blues" (191). In *The Violence Mythos*, Barbara Whitmer describes this kind of self-distanciation or "dissociation" as a characteristic "coping mechanism in response to trauma" (171). Quoting Bennett Braun, Whitmer writes that dissociative behavior can be seen as a withdrawal "'from the integrated flow of mental activity'" (173). In various ways, Steinke provides a complex narrative account of the relation between dissociation and trauma. In *Jesus Saves*, a number of frightening withdrawals, so-to-speak, occur on the part of Sandy Patrick. Without making normal temporal distinctions, she dissociates dramatically from her present reality by recalling past memories mostly of her mother and brother. She furthermore experiences herself strangely as an unfamiliar other, and she fails on more than one occasion to recognize her own reflection in her abductor's glasses.[5] She also distances horrifying experiences like her rape by the troll by mentally transforming them into ironic moments of beauty. Writing that Sandy,

> heard the tiny teeth of [the troll's] zipper disconnected [...] then a sound like when skin hits water in a belly flop, and her elbows skidded forward, burned on the polyester mattress. Her forehead bumped the wall hard. Lilacs were beautiful, so beautiful, and she went right down into the center of that tiny flower, to the stamen, to the pistol, to where the yellow pollen brushed off on your eyelashes and the smell made you drunk with love (56),

Steinke highlights mental dissociation as an ambiguous coping mechanism and an uncertain means of escape.

Having shown, I think, that parts of *Jesus Saves* (specifically the sections concerning Sandy Patrick) cross readerly thresholds not usually broached and confront us with the real in all its unbearable horror, the questions then might be asked, what keeps us reading this text with its escalating series of misfortunes, what keeps us from being broken emotionally by it, and why do we respond to Steinke's repeated return to loss? In answer to these questions, Seltzer's theory of contemporary wound culture and the pathological public fascination with traumatic spectacle allows us to see *Jesus Saves* within the context of a larger cultural turn to atrocity. Perhaps we read Steinke's trauma narrative, then, with its aesthetics of abjection because it reinforces our contemporary desire for a new "sociality premised on the wound" or premised upon loss itself—perhaps, in other words, we want to be broken. Or to see things somewhat differently, perhaps we read the fiction because the taboos that normally work to silence the realities of violence, rape, and pedophilia are transgressed in Sandy's narrative, and this expression of the "truth," so-to-speak, although painful, is nonetheless politically important and compelling. From another perspective, however, while we might identify with the woundedness *Jesus Saves* depicts, the text nonetheless also works to defetishize violence by inscribing the violated or sacrificed female body as a sign of a national pathology. In other words, Steinke shows us something horrible, but she attempts also to combat this horror or to erect, to use MacCannell's terms, "a new form of shelter" (53) against Sadean violence by showing her protagonists in relations not only of complicity but also of rupture regarding the brutal circumstances they find themselves in. It is partly this struggle between repetition and resistance, this move toward transformation that allows us to get through this dark and disturbing text. The last part of this essay is devoted, then, to outlining how *Jesus Saves* seeks to transform the feminine from a site of pain, terror, and victimization into sites of resistance, creativity, and new linguistic as well as sociopolitical possibilities.

Part 3: The Movement Away from the Sadistic Scene and Toward a New Feminine Ethic

My exploration of the moments of agency in Steinke's fiction focuses on two textual elements: first, the turn from realism to fantasy as the dominant literary mode in Sandy Patrick's narrative, and second, the way in which Steinke's protagonist Ginger works both through and against traumatic formations, managing finally to resist the lure of lethal *jouissance* (or of the "obscene Thing"), and to rescript, at least partially, the victim's story. In her troubling account of Sandy Patrick's slow annihilation, Steinke goes a long way, possibly all the way, toward bringing us to an encounter with the "obscene Thing." However, interrupting the realist narrative trajectory that will lead us eventually to Sandy's abandoned, dead body "[s]meared with feces and covered with spider bites," are the strange and fantastical sections, which figure on one level in the text as the young girl's only personal luxury in a limit situation (212). *Jesus Saves*'s fantastical passages tell related stories about a bear, a turtle, a unicorn, and a caterpillar-turned-butterfly among other animals, insects, and mythological creatures. Sandy's fantasies can be dismissed simply as infantile residue, or as a return to childhood language and narrative. Or they can be seen as another mechanism of dissociation or sublimation by which the girl attempts imaginatively to evade (or in some way to allegorize) the unbearable reality of her situation, to "*Think of something nice*," as Sandy herself puts it (56). However, the fact that her fantasies sometimes intertwine thematically with her actual traumatic experience (the unicorn, for instance, reveals to Sandy that she was "chosen" for her "similarities to raindrops and day-old kittens, to the first white crocus and a baby's tender heart [...]. These are the qualities of a princess, [...says the unicorn] and so we directed the troll to you" [136]), suggests that far from being merely escapist, Sandy's fantasies may accord her a more active and possibly even subversive engagement with the debasing circumstances she finds herself in.

In her book, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, Peggy Phelan makes a comment about trauma that might help to conceptualize the ways in which Steinke uses fantasy in *Jesus Saves* as a political form of creativity. Writing that, "trauma is untouchable, [...] it cannot be represented. The symbolic cannot carry it: trauma makes a tear in the symbolic network itself" (5), Phelan theorizes trauma not only in terms of a representational crisis, but also I think as a form of violence or revolt in itself. Contrary to Phelan's notion about trauma's unrepresentability, I argue that Steinke does attempt as far as is possible (in realist terms) to represent extreme psychic and bodily suffering. However, in *Jesus Saves* realist representation is indeed thrown into crisis, causing a new kind of writing that figures traumatic experience through formal rupture. In other words, in *Jesus Saves* trauma "makes a tear," as Phelan says, in the dominant realist order, and this tear is marked by one of the novel's formal features: its turn to fantasy as a mental practice—as an exercise of the imagination—that can potentially subvert the humiliations imposed on the girl by her abductor. My contention, then, is that *Jesus Saves*'s bold experimentations with fantasy mark not only a literary but also a political transgression or "tear," and furthermore signify resistance on a textual level. To borrow from Reineke, fantasy in *Jesus Saves*, in other words, can be seen as a kind of "emancipating grammar."

Julia Kristeva's notion of *poetic language* is also useful for understanding Steinke's traumatic-fantastic narrative production. In an interview with Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Kristeva says that, "poetic language [...] is for me an instance of both a subjective crisis and an amplification of the register of expression" ("Avant-Garde Practice" 212). Poetic language, she continues, "constitutes [...] a repetition of language in its origins, in its past, and thus a regression. At the same time, it is a transformation [...] of the most archaic elements: fear, passion, abjection—themes that are worked through in literature. It is also the elaboration of the archaic material in an outlook of revolt, insubmission, and defiance" (213). In many ways, Steinke's turn to fantasy, I argue, indicates language becoming poetic in the Kristevean sense of the term. While Steinke shows Sandy Patrick to be a docile and dying body silenced by and *subject to* her abductor, the girl's fantasies conversely reveal her to be an active agent of linguistic creativity (a *subject of* a new language) who manages to move beyond a space of silenced victimization to a new, imaginary space that includes, as I will show, the possibility of both courage and symbolic transformation.

Throughout the course of her abduction, Sandy Patrick's fantastical imaginings become more sustained and elaborate. During the first few days of her kidnapping she recalls getting a unicorn and a baby bear for Christmas the year before her brother was born. Sandy's full-blown fantasies develop from this recollection of the gift, becoming more detailed following her questioning of her own status as a subject, of whether she is "still the same person" in the face of her degradation (52). This questioning of the self and the coincidental turn to fantasy as a narrative mode suggests that in *Jesus Saves* the border negotiation between realism and fantasy marks not only a representational crisis of sorts, but, to borrow from Kristeva, a "subjective crisis" as well. Put another way, the turn to the fantastic indicates the workings of abjection. But it also shows how abjection can be transformed from a state of pain and deficiency, into an oppositional state of resilience, creativity, and strength. For instance, in one of the girl's fantasies she dreams of how a group of birds—including an egret, a robin, a black crow, a number of blue jays, and a flock of seagulls—plan to extricate her from the troll's clutches:

> The blue jays, who thought of themselves more like marines than civil servants, wanted to bust the window, lead her out through the shards of splintered glass.

> The egret, a coy international spy, wanted to infiltrate the house solo, pin the man to his chair with its long lancelike beak, while all the other birds flew down the hall, pecked through the plywood door, and set the girl free. A flock of seagulls wanted to tear the man's eyes out, then send the water rats in to finish him off. There were other proposals, the robin's call for peaceful negotiations, the owl's for covert night maneuvers. […] the black crow said that there wasn't much time left […]. (93)

This passage instances a clear moment of subversion, a private moment but one filled with violent insurgency nonetheless. It shows how despite the girl's gross physical subjection to her abductor, her psychic life remains under her own control. If, as Kristeva says, poetic language "is a transformation" of abjection into "an outlook of revolt," then the above excerpt constitutes such language. The troll might lead the girl to question her own status as a person, he might silence, confine, and delimit her, but fantasy or poetic thought allows her a sense of agency, strength, and hope. It allows her as well the ability to envision another outcome than the fatal one the troll has in store for her. In effect, fantasy becomes a powerful exercise in subjectivity, a way for the girl to embark on her own transformation quest, a cure for lethargy and nullification, a means to move from a space of passive victimization potentially to one of free subjecthood, and additionally a symbolic denunciation of violent, authoritarian control. Turning momentarily to the "Lordship and Bondage" section of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, I find Hegel's comment that the "truth of the independent consciousness is […] the consciousness of the bondsman" valuable here (237). I imagine Sandy Patrick's fantasies, in other words, not only in Kristevean terms but also in Hegelian terms as the "work" of the slave or bondsman, who through labor discovers, as Hegel says, his "independent consciousness," or his "having and being a 'mind of his own'" (239).

Other scenes in *Jesus Saves* written in the poetic or imaginative mode also accentuate how fantasy—even if only momentarily and secretly—undermines the deep paralysis and the abjection prescribed for Steinke's protagonist. For instance, gagged, confined, and soiled in a pee-stained bed, Sandy fantasizes escaping the troll by flying with the unicorn:

> The mall from above resembled sand dunes, and the myriad condominium complexes, patches of mushrooms. Wind stung her ears and jerked her hair back. She crouched behind the unicorn's head, her hands fisted in the long hair of its mane. His fur smelled like old snow and was sooty and damp, pricked up on end with the effort. (138)

The unicorn eventually spirals "down until he hovered like a dragonfly just above the split-level's bay window" of Sandy's home (138). The girl watches her mother and brother, who occupy their own states of mourning following Sandy's disappearance. While Sandy's fantasy entails no unequivocal flight from loss as we might expect, it does imply transportation and escape nonetheless. Specifically, it affords a nostalgic return and reconnection in which the girl momentarily eludes her abjection, rediscovers her familial place, and re-establishes meaning and value in the space of her absence.

Other fantastical sections in *Jesus Saves* are more clearly affirming and hopeful. The passages about the caterpillar-turned-butterfly, for example, all thematize transformation and the miraculous escape of death. The butterfly speaks on one occasion of a woman named Donna Polito who falls into a coma, but recovers when she dreams of her children's voices. "'Something similar could happen to you,'" says the butterfly encouragingly to the girl (136). The butterfly goes on to tell Sandy another story about a baby falling from a building's ledge, but rescued from near death by an anonymous man who arrives "'just in time to catch the infant in his cradled arms'" (139). The butterfly tells other similar stories thematizing a world of possibility or a world of metamorphosis in which all things negative become affirmative, and in which even certain death can be transformed into the start of a new life. These fantasies featuring the butterfly signify, I think, how Sandy's desire to live often overwhelms the death drive; they can be read as powerful expressions of the subject's defense or labor against impending death.

While some of Sandy Patrick's fantasies allow her imaginatively to escape death, other fantasies force her directly to confront the cold fact of death itself. In one such fantasy, Sandy places herself at school listening to the principal's early morning announcements about a teacher's stolen purse and the recent cafeteria food fights, as "the unicorn snuck by the school secretary and slipped into […the principal's] office" (153). Taking the principal's "antiquated microphone," the unicorn reports the deaths both of Carl Levitt, who "'shot himself while cleaning his gun yesterday and [of] Sally Dyers [who] died last night of the leukemia that has kept her bedridden for so many months. It may seem cruel,' the unicorn said, 'but eventually everyone has to make the transition from animal to mineral'" (153-54). In some ways, Carl Levitt's and Sally Dyers's deaths function as ciphers for the death Sandy does not want to see, but senses nonetheless. I read the above passage, in other words, as marking a veiled moment of recognition that gives the girl time to prepare for the possibility of her own death, or allows her to rehearse for death by envisioning it in others. It also prepares the reader for the following scene at the text's close that in fact transforms the girl's dying into the finality of a death:

> [...] she felt all the air leaving her life like an inner tube with a pinprick leak. The ice broke under her weight and she sank down into the lake's cold water. Her hand clawed out, frenzied and separate, until she grasped the lava rock and sat up in her bed, poured white sugar in her palm so the deer would tongue her lifeline, her blue-veined wrist. It felt nice, his urgent animal tongue. But still she couldn't help thinking, *Is this all there is to it?* (193)

Again, this section of the fiction reiterates the curative or saving power of the imaginary. It also conveys Sandy Patrick's immense courage and her fantastical (paradoxical) struggle toward life as her body approaches the most fearful moment of death.

Fantasy in *Jesus Saves* clearly functions in a complex capacity. It appears in the novel as a secret or intimate form of resistance, as an emblem of the struggle to open a textually vibrant space where female agency can at least be glimpsed, as a transformative mode through which tragedy and negativity are overcome, and additionally as a means by which the subject faces, and perhaps thereby exorcises, fear of the unknown. In the end, the struggle for transformation that *Jesus Saves* enacts is for Sandy Patrick (and for the reader as well) both a success and a disappointment. It is disappointing because the girl remains in the end subject to her oppressor; however, it is also successful because she becomes subject of some new, imaginative interventions, subject of a new mentality. As Steinke concludes her novel, the girl ends up both an abject and a transfigured body, both "[s]meared with feces [...] strange and shrunken [as well as] transported to the nether world, a wood nymph or a forest fairy, formed only inside the pages of a children's book" (212).

Steinke's other protagonist, Ginger, is also tied to *Jesus Saves*'s themes of change and female agency. Through much of the narrative, however, it appears that Ginger is destined to repeat in her own life the trauma she bears witness to in Sandy Patrick's life. Ginger reflects frequently throughout the text on the media and local community's accounts of Sandy's abduction, and she furthermore imagines what has not yet been seen: the young girl's worsening state and eventual death in which "[r]ed ants crawled into her nostrils, along the bottom row of lashes and between her parted purple lips" (74). Ginger's story is troubling not only because of her grim preoccupations, but also because it suggests a pattern of traumatic repetition, in which the grisly fate of the younger girl seems to direct the fate of the older girl. Ginger, in other words, is often portrayed as a potential trauma victim, or suggestively figured as the novel's next sacrificial body. She is tied symbolically, for instance, to Christ's crucifixion when she receives the communion wafer and wine ("*This is his blood shed for you*," her father intones) and experiences simultaneously the arrival of her menstrual period, thinking, "*How ridiculous [...] that this is happening now*" (25). Her attraction to the "fouled and fucked-up woods" (123) between the strip-mall franchises and the new Deerpath subdivision likewise connects her not explicitly to Christ's wounded body, but rather to the body of Sandy Patrick, whose abduction and death both occur in the woods. Most of the passages depicting Ginger's strange excursions through the woods are written in a fearful and apprehensive voice, and read like pages from a book of stalker fiction. On one occasion in the forest, Ginger hears "behind her what sounded like a footstep, a crackle of dry leaves" (50). On another night she sees "something scurrying away, disappearing into the weeds." She panics, runs toward the houses at the wood's edge, and imagines that a deer is "chasing her, running like a man up on two feet" (88). A few chapters later during another outing, Ginger hears "a sound in the trees [...] like a belly flop, or a slap across the face." She gets caught on a kudzu vine, goes down, and feels "five warm fingers [...wrap] around her ankle" (112-13). The above scene is especially distressing because its prose mimics the language found in an earlier passage depicting Sandy's rape by the troll, in which he unzips his pants and Sandy hears "a sound like when skin hits water in a belly flop" (56). Although the fingers wrapped around Ginger's ankle turn out to belong to her boyfriend Ted, the linguistic blurring of scenes or the linguistic superimposition of one scene on the other creates a troubling sense of traumatic narrative repetition.

The sense of events repeating themselves comes to a climax at the text's close when Ginger goes back into the woods in search of a misguided and recently disappeared teenage girl she has previously befriended, the same one she earlier describes wearing the electric blue pumps:

> Ginger walked out the barn doorway, stood looking into the woods, thought another deer might be moving among the trees, or the ghost deer had come back to haunt the woods, searching for its head. Coming around the side of the barn, she saw a figure and though at first she couldn't make out the features, she presumed it was Ted, but then stray condominium light showed a small hunched man with a long white beard and bulging eyes. Anger shot off him, dense and oppressive as an opened oven door, as he yanked her arm so hard the bone

> wheezed and strained against her shoulder socket. He swung his arm up and hit her in the face, thumb jabbing into her eye, the ridge of his fingers breaking the bridge of her nose. Blood ran into her mouth and she felt dizzy. [...] She screamed until her whole head vibrated, blood flooding the valley beneath her tongue, and she slid deep into herself [...]. (205-06)

We recognize the "small hunched" figure of the above passage as Sandy Patrick's abductor, who she describes early in the fiction as a man "with a long white beard and yellow teeth. [...] the lonely troll in fairy tales" (63). Following the troll's attack on Ginger, he throws her inside his van where she finds the teenage girl, "bound and stretched on a mattress," her captive body replacing Sandy Patrick's now dead body. Ginger tries to fight off the kidnapper and to save the girl, but she fails and is cut badly in the face:

> She turned, saw the raised knife gleam then felt a tug at the side of her mouth and a soft sound like lettuce ripping, and above her head the sky filled with radiant light, illuminating the veiny backs of leaves, and she thought, *It's an angel coming to save me*. Branches quivered and shook as four white horse legs broke through the green canopy and the unicorn flapped its luscious white wings in a succession of tiny flutters that allowed him to land expertly on the van's roof. A brown bear wearing a bow tie, its paws entwined in the long mane hair, rode bareback. (206-07)

This scene depicts a strange and intersubjective moment wherein Ginger mimetically assumes the fantasies of the now dead Sandy Patrick, and experiences the self essentially as other. The scene symbolically conveys how the younger girl's death is intimately connected to the older girl's life, and it produces, moreover, a climactic sense of traumatic reproduction, or of what Mark Seltzer might consider "a fundamental *breakdown* in the autonomy of the subject." However, Ginger's fate is in fact not Sandy's fate: when Ginger regains normal consciousness she finds the van gone and herself bleeding on the forest floor. She staggers "out of the tree line to the first lit window" and is helped by an older woman whose initial fear at the sight of Ginger's bloodied body turns quickly to "maternal concern" (207). Like Marlow in some ways from Conrad's modernist narrative *Heart of Darkness*, Ginger has been permitted in a sense to draw back her "hesitating foot" from perversion's unspeakable abyss. Separated by a century, these characters have in common the fact that they face an overpowering force or horror: in Marlow's case, the predations of colonialism and in Ginger's, the obscene lure of sexual sadism. Both figures are drawn toward the unspeakable, but they also discover how to recover, how to leave the abusive scene.

Conclusion

The events at the close of Steinke's fiction are important not only because they undermine the repetitive force of trauma and aim to free the girl, as MacCannell might put it, from the lure of the "obscene Thing," but also because they emphasize the allegiance that might pass between women. Not only does Ginger risk herself in an attempt to save the troll's second girl victim and intervene in his practice of serial child abduction, but another unnamed woman helps Ginger in turn to safety. Through such portrayals of women in active care of one another, Steinke affirms female solidarity and sociality (things foreclosed to Sadean woman) in the face of a sacrificial economy and pornographic culture of violence. Steinke, it might be argued, "refind[s]" at least some portion of what remains "of the human [...]after a certain limit has been surpassed" (MacCannell 11). The novel's ending is meaningful as well because of its representation of a form of female agency that extends beyond the framework of the imagination onto the level of actual, aggressive practice. In other words, Ginger's physical confrontation with the troll inserts into the text an active female element that it would not otherwise have. Although *Jesus Saves* affirms, as I have argued, the value and significance of fantasy or poetic thought even (or especially) in the extreme context of private bodily disaster, it by no means therefore necessarily eschews the importance of action on more concrete, physical, and social levels.

In conclusion, it is important to stress that while locating Steinke in a theoretical context helps to illuminate her literary project, her work also *adds* something to theories about wound culture, trauma, and violence. Her position as a novelist, in other words, means that she is uniquely situated to address things like trauma's psycholinguistic aspects, or to search for new textual forms capable of addressing (and potentially transforming) violent or unspeakable social contexts. In *Jesus Saves*, experiences of dissociation or trauma are marked in fact not only on the human body, but marked also on the body of the text itself through the experimental turn from realism to fantasy as one of the dominant representational modes. Steinke's emphasis on both literary experimentalism and Sadean violence is far from apolitical and connects her to other writers like Kathy Acker, for whom, as we shall see in the next chapters, linguistic rupture signals not only the pain, trauma, and confusion of the feminine margins, but also a form of struggle and a subversive disengagement from the patriarchal social order.

Notes

1. In his book *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard advances a theory of ritual sacrifice, combining ethnographic study and analyses of classical tragedy to underscore his views. At the opening of his book, Girard claims that if "sacrifice resembles criminal violence, we may say that there is, inversely, hardly any form of violence that cannot be described in terms of sacrifice" (1). With the expressed aim of locating "the essential function of sacrifice," Girard asserts that sacrifice can be understood as an "act of collective substitution performed at the expense of the victim and absorbing all the internal tensions, feuds, and rivalries pent up within the community" (5, 7). In Girard's understanding, sacrificial formations "deflect [violence] upon a relatively indifferent victim" like an animal, a small child, or an otherwise marginal social member of the community (4).

2. Early in *Jesus Saves*, Ginger and her boyfriend Ted accidentally kill a deer while driving on the highway. The deer incident is tied closely to the narrative's religious themes and themes of sacrifice. In the novel's symbolism, the deer is also persistently associated with the traumatized feminine body, primarily with Sandy Patrick's body. The deer's death quickly assumes sacrificial overtones as Ted subjects its flesh to paradoxically profane and juvenile rites. "Solemn and ceremonial as an acolyte" (9), Ted beheads the animal in a symbolically sacrificial gesture, and then takes the deer's head to an abandoned barn where it slowly decays. The fact that both Ted and Ginger are moved spiritually by the deer suggests that its death allows for something not necessarily provided by conventional religious forms. As I read the event, the characters' accidental highway killing of the animal is transformed in their experience into a new rite that exceeds the empty simulacra of old religious ceremony and credits moreover the existence of the real thing.

3. In the woods behind Macdonald's, Ginger comes across another mutilated doll with "a ravaged […] head" on which "[s]omeone had scribbled swastikas […] with green magic marker" (165-66). In the above image, the mark of the swastika on the doll's body explicitly links the violence done to the feminine with the atrocities of the holocaust, and implies thereby an extensive, historical pattern of horrific abuse.

4. In "Doll Parts" from the album *Live Through This*, Hole's Courtney Love refers to herself as having "doll eyes, doll mouth […] I am doll parts," she says. In her lyrics, Love emphasizes the female body's objectification and dehumanization in commodity capitalism. Cindy Sherman's 1998 "Sex Pictures" (which I discuss more fully in the thesis Introduction) rearrange the prosthetic body parts of medical-supply-house dolls into new and grotesque figurations in order to voice a similar (albeit more elaborate and sustained) experience of abjection, and also to call into question normative ideals of feminine beauty. In *In Memoriam to Identity*, Kathy Acker, as we shall see, likewise uses the image of smashed dolls both to suggest bodily and psychic trauma, and to advance a new, de-idealized model of the feminine subject.

5. Sandy Patrick's dissociation or misrecognition is apparent early in the text when she looks in "the twin panes of [...her kidnapper's] glasses," and sees herself in the third person as "the girl with the short black hair" (55). Much later during her abduction Sandy remains "mesmerized by the reflection" in the troll's glasses; however, the image she sees has become less recognizable, "only vaguely familiar" (136-37).

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CHAPTER THREE:

Poetics of the Periphery: Literary Experimentalism in Kathy Acker's *In Memoriam to Identity*[1]

Introduction

I side with those who are injured, trespassed upon[...].
Hélène Cixous, "Sorties" 71

I was unspeakable so I ran into the language of others.
Kathy Acker, "Seeing Genders" in *Bodies* 161

Reading Kathy Acker's novels can be intellectually disorienting and emotionally disturbing. The trauma of reading Acker stems partly from the fact that she does away with aestheticism's ideological emphasis on beauty, so that things like razors, suicides, abortions, incest, infection, and menstrual blood figure prominently in the strange, abject imagistic texture of her work. She further advances the negative (or the sign of the wound) by presenting brutalized and unsettled subjectivities of the urban periphery in sunless and impoverished cityscapes of waste, piss, shit, and vomit. She embraces marginalized figures—the prostituted, the promiscuous, and the homoerotic, for example—who abandon or are abandoned by official social structures like the family. Her complex intertextuality allows for a polyphony of dejected, disconforming voices and further subverts the univocality of aestheticism's totalizing discourse of artistic and subjective autonomy. The fact that Acker uses nonmimetic and nonrealist forms (she jettisons conventional temporal and spatial sequencing, abandons the rules of plot and character consistency, and constructs a poetics of discontent by trashing proper linguistic and grammatical arrangements) similarly attests to her disregard of narrative expectations of intelligibility and has likely contributed to her marginality as a writer. Where we want discursive order, Acker delivers disorder, and compels us thereby to meet her on her own (and other) linguistic territory.

In an attempt to address how Acker opens language and text to marginal sexual and social spaces, this chapter focuses mainly on her innovative and disruptive writing strategies in her novel, *In Memoriam to Identity*. My argument is that Acker launches an experimental, oppositional narrative and constructs an alternate, transgressive poetics of the wounded margins in order to give voice to the cultural underside, in order to symbolize libidinal activities and desires that have been muted or made unspeakable by normative representations. She furthermore, I argue, deconstructs notions of private authorship and separate identity, and can consequently be read alongside various theorists like Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, M. M. Bakhtin, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, all of whom variously re-envision the subject or rethink notions of authorship itself. Acker's literary production as a whole consistently invokes the abject and the heterological in relation to the subject. My choice to explore *In Memoriam to Identity*'s literary subversions, rather than the transgressions, for instance, of her earlier works, reflects a personal preference for the text, as well as an admiration for the experimental ways in which it broadens the feminine sexual imaginary, presents unconventional libidinal practices, and begins to advance the possibility of a viable, collective, and heterogeneous subjectivity.

Acker's plagiaristic intertextuality,[2] her audacious use of other writer's productions and biographies as well, is one of her most defining artistic methods and signifies a major literary transgression of conventional narrative patterns that legitimize ideologies of artistic unity and subjective integrity. In "A Few Notes on Two of My Books," which was first published in 1989 a year before the publication of *In Memoriam*, Acker acknowledges that her writing practice is to travel "through innumerable [other] texts [...]. I make up nothing," she says (13). In *In Memoriam to Identity* she characteristically abandons all pretence of private authorship and steals generously and licentiously from both French and American literature. Her primary sources are Rimbaud's poetry and biography and Faulkner's novels, *Sanctuary*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *The Wild Palms*. While it is often suggested that Acker's rearticulations of past texts reveal a parodic and deconstructive relationship with previous literature,[3] this is not entirely the case in *In Memoriam to Identity* where she both *draws upon* and *extends* the existing heterological content in Faulkner's novels as well as the otherness evoked both by Rimbaud's art and by his homoerotic relationship with Verlaine. Rimbaud's marginalized poetic manifesto which includes the declaration, "*Je* est un autre" ("*I* is somebody else"),[4] provides Acker with a model or foundational *myth*[5] of subjective and artistic alterity. It is with the retextualization of Rimbaud's life and art that Acker opens her fiction.

Part 1: Rimbaud, Abjection, Masochism, and the Construction of a Collective Subjectivity in Heterogeneity

I'm trying to become other people[...].
Kathy Acker, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* 86

Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just others, that we ourselves are an 'other' among others. [...] it becomes possible to wander [...].
Paul Ricoeur as qtd. in Craig Owens's, "The Discourse of Others" 76

In Memoriam to Identity's beginning section—simply entitled "Rimbaud"—is set mostly in nineteenth-century France and Belgium, and is therefore faithful to Rimbaud's early biography.[6] Yet this opening part of the fiction defies realist notions of setting and character to the extent that it seems more valuable to speak of the novel's delineation of fluctuating mental and sexual spaces, rather than of specific geographic places. Most of the spaces evoked in the novel's early section are peripheral ones of abuse, abandonment, violent eroticism, desire, wonder, and despair. Rimbaud—or, as Acker more often calls him, "R"[7]—is the protagonist or central voice of the novel's first section. However, other voices like Baudelaire's and Verlaine's are present as well. Although it seems particularly difficult to offer a coherent plot summary of "Rimbaud," on a most basic level, R's voice largely directs the narrative providing a counter-discourse to hegemonic ideologies of marriage, family, heterosexuality, and stable bourgeois identity. R expresses the utopian desire for a "new world" (21). Yet, "Rimbaud" by no means articulates a permanent emancipatory space. Although "Rimbaud" attempts to imagine different forms of human relations apart from patriarchal and sacrificial ones, the text's real difficulty and provocation is that it traces a conflicting narrative path between oppression and opposition, between repetition and resistance, despondency and possibility.

Acker's first order of narrative business is to call into question the prevailing romantic discourse of family. We are informed on the first few pages of the fiction that R's "husbandless mother," abandoned by Captain Rimbaud who "hated children so much," brings R up "in the middle of decay, urban garbage, [and] spiritual nihilism" by "torturing him" (3-4). R learns "torturous [sadomasochistic] love" more emphatically from his uncle, African Pain who, "stuck his hand up the kid's ass, repeatedly making and unclosing a fist, until unfiled fingernails ripped the membranes" (5). Explicitly extending this early scene of abuse between R and his uncle, Acker writes: "At the end of the tunnel of membranes the kid's heart was beating. [...] the man pushed his arm up until he was holding the heart. The heart felt like a bird. Holding on to the heart, he threw the kid to the ground, kicked him in the side until the kid knew that he was nothing" (5). Able neither "to bear" nor to "stop these tortures," R, says Acker, "moved into the imaginary," but still "need [ed...] pain and being controlled" in order "to cut through [...] autism," discover "the highest pleasure which is love," and "find [...his] soul" (5-6). The following assertions accompany Acker's account of R's early degradation: " The pirate brat [R] is seeking real pirate treasure in the dirty recesses of being. [...] Unheard-of metals and sea gems can dribble out of the tip of your cock. [...] The soul is the body" (6).

As the above textual quotations convey, Acker graphically directs narrative attention to a marginal sociosexual space that has been made unspeakable by dominant cultural discourses. The above horrifying scene of sexual trauma and abuse functions metaphorically to expose the dysfunctional family romance with its cast of victims and victimizers. The scene's immediate effect, then, is to call into question the prevailing romantic mythology of family. Yet apart from the scene's negativity, it is striking in various ways. In its construction of the subject, for instance, it unequivocally refuses to withdraw the body. It challenges the dualistic opposition between the body and the soul, and attempts to refigure the subject through postmetaphysical terms in which the body in its most material manifestations is the locus of the conscious subject. A related consideration is that the early scene of wounding and abuse intermixes the sacred and the profane so that, "sea-gems can dribble out of the tip of your cock" and the "pirate brat" R can seek "real pirate treasure in the dirty recesses of being." The coupling of the debased and the delicate is apparent also in the lines: "The man stuck his hand up the kid's ass, [...] the kid's heart was beating. […] he was holding the heart. The heart felt like a bird." On a small scale, the fiction's opening lines indicate one of Acker's most provocative novelistic concerns: the resignification or transformation of pain and debasement. It is not that Acker idealizes wounding or victimhood; rather, she attempts to transform it linguistically into something other than simply a site of pain and oppression. Acker writes the character of R as subject *to* abject sexual abuse (as "Unable to [...] stop these tortures"), but also as potentially subject *of* new narrative representations through movement "into the imaginary." R's violent physical humiliations, in fact, lead transmutatively to articulations, albeit uncertain ones, of love: "I love you," says R to African Pain, "show me [...] love […]. Love?" (5-6). My point, then, is that Acker early constructs her protagonist as produced and yet not necessarily circumscribed by the abuses of his torturers.

A related way perhaps of discussing the provocation of the scene above is with regard to R's masochistic revelation that he needs pain or wounding because "it cut[s] through my autism." On one level, Acker writes masochism as a pathology *produced* through violent, familial acculturation. Yet it is simultaneously one of the tropes through which she refigures the subject not in closed terms of autonomous identity, but in open ones of difference and discontinuous rupture. Acker, to a certain degree, then, takes up the materials bequeathed by oppressive social structures and seeks their transformation.

Anita Phillips's work, *A Defence of Masochism*, is helpful on this point. Phillips writes of the necessity of intervention within *existing* structures and speaks of the "reclaiming of masochism." "It is precisely," she says, "where something denigrates or harms that it needs to be taken on and owned, worked on and transformed" (64-65). Phillips's argument is that past pejorative discourses on masochism require rearticulation. Phillips by no means defends forced violence but sees, rather, "political usefulness" in the masochist's ability to rewrite "oppression as pleasure" (54, 65). She sees ethical possibility also in the masochist's openness to otherness, or to being "invaded by the other person's presence" (105). Phillips's work illuminates part of the novelistic project of *In Memoriam to Identity*, which is to reimagine along more ethical lines the subject's relation to others. Through retextualizing Rimbaud's poetics of "*Je* est un autre," Acker reclaims and begins to reimagine the "pathology" of subjective masochism, seeking its positive resignification into an epistemological openness towards difference. Acker takes up the masochistic body and subjectivity from a feminine perspective later in the concluding section of the novel, "The Wild Palms." Through the protagonist Airplane, who reveals graphically how her German lover, as she says, "hurt me and made me come" (219), Acker explores the contentious issue of masochism's political usefulness for women. Acker presents Airplane's masochism as an allegory of change in which pain and passivity are recast into intentional states of erotic pleasure. But more on Airplane's paradoxical "self-destructiveness and strength" later (*In Mem* 220). At present, I would like to look specifically at how "Rimbaud" negotiates the contradictions of effecting subjective transformation within a social context remaining unchanged.

The dominant question posed in "Rimbaud" is essentially how to live when there is no "correspondence between the desire of the mind and body and the society outside that mind and body" (10). "Rimbaud" early thematizes the possibilities of difference but also the difficulties inherent in the struggle to transform ingrained social structures. R finds in both school with Father Fist and in the motorcycle gang with Dubois that the cultural models of subjectivity available to him are insufficient and seemingly inalterable. To be a social subject implies for R unequivocal identifications: either with the position of victim or with that of victimizer. Father Fist seeks R's "educational" conversion from the former to the latter. He says to R, "You're playing around the edges [of identity]. You have to kill" (15). But R rejects this ideology of identity as built upon the murder, sacrifice, or negation of the other: "R," Acker writes, "now wanted to escape this school [...] and his identity" (18). His subsequent and brief stay with a motorcycle gang of revolutionaries proves similarly unsatisfactory, since the only form of revolution the gang members can conceive of is to become their own oppressors. Dubois, the motorcycle leader, states to R: "You decide. You can either be a criminal or a victim. You can either kill or be killed" (20). Rejecting Dubois's binary philosophy, "R decided" that "he wanted a new world. He had to escape" (21). The "*I*," he says most prophetically, "must die" (21). R seeks, then, both the loss of identity and the entry into a new order. He resists ideological inscription into an exclusionary, univocal model of identity and insists instead upon the production of something other—upon the creation of a new life, a new significance.

R's repudiation of conventional identity connects him profoundly to abjection in a Kristevean sense of the term. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva contends that the abject "disturbs identity" and is neither subject nor object, but "has [...] one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*" (4, 1). Furthermore, says Kristeva, the abject self is an exile, "in short a stray":

> The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who [...] *strays* instead of getting his bearings, [...] the space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never *one*, nor *homogeneous*, nor *totalizable*, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic. (8)

Kristeva's comments bear provocatively upon R who, dejected by the normative psycho-social order, ventures beyond the violence of binary opposition and separate identity, and toward the compelling discovery, "that he [...] had nothing better to do than wander" (*In Mem* 22). Although R strays literally across the France-Belgium border, he also strays ontologically by reading the poetry of others. Like Acker herself, who moves "into the language of others" to find different models of being ("Seeing Genders" 161), R's desire for a different erotics and subjectivity leads him to the illicit but multiple discourses of other French poets such as, "Villon, Gautier, Verlaine, [and] Baudelaire" (22).

Entering and declaiming this dissident artistic tradition becomes an exercise in an alternate, abject, and composite subjectivity, and a means to resist the homogenizing subjective limits imposed by various authorities. Nearly two full pages of "Rimbaud" are devoted to reproducing Baudelaire's "Au Lecteur" as a reflection of R's broadening poetic imaginary. But Baudelaire's poem is by no means duplicated exactly. Rather, the text is mediated and artistically reformulated through R's voice. So, for instance, Baudelaire's lines, "If rape or arson, poison, or the knife / Has wove no pleasing patterns in the stuff / Of this drab canvas we accept as life – / It is because we are not bold enough!" (25-28), become in R's adulterated version of the poem, "Abortions razors suicides viciousness / Haven't yet carved death into this self / Only because my heart's begging / For something else" (23). R's permissive and "double-voiced"[8] rereading of Baudelaire both instances subjective agency and shows meaning to be susceptible to intervention, to be unfixed, to be always in progress, and always negotiated. Such a representation of the continual and open production of meaning explicitly undercuts closed and monologic discourses like those voiced earlier by Father Fist and Dubois. Moreover, in having R "speak" Baudelaire and other poet-voices, Acker thematizes the expansive multivocality of the subject. Or perhaps it is more discerning to say that through iconoclastic intertextual play, she reveals how "becoming other" (linguistically, that is) opens a space of dialogical intersubjectivity in which different, refracting voices are simultaneously present. R, announcing that "To be a poet is to wake inside someone else's skin" (23), comes indeed into a voice neither autonomous nor singular, but rather polyphonic and plural.

"Rimbaud's" intertextual complexity is deepened by the narrative inclusion of a long Japanese interlude about two lovers "in crisis," Uneme and Tomomori, who are trying to flee together from an oppressive symbolic space of urban decay where, "dead bodies floated in the waters of buried or forgotten rivers" (51). The illicit love-story of Uneme and Tomomori, written, Acker tells us, by Murasaki Shikibu in A.D. 1008, ruptures the central narrative with its spatial, temporal, and authorial displacements. Yet the interlude also metonymically recontextualizes the central story of R and Verlaine, in which the latter is torn between competing desires for "odious bourgeois existence and identity," on the one hand, and for "the vulnerability of real identity" and heterogeneous homosexuality, on the other hand (32). In the Japanese story, Tomomori is conflicted in a manner similar to Verlaine; and Uneme, for whom "Wounds are the signs of [...] love" (50), shares R's masochistic sensitivity. Cutting across the main romance of R and Verlaine, the interlude redirects narrative attention to another side of the same story. Further complicating any sense of a "straight" narrative trajectory is yet another refracted account of transgressive sexual love (about a poet who "fell in love with a woman with whom he couldn't fall in love, for she was married" [48]) within the already parenthetical[9] Japanese interlude. In addition, there are intruding interlocutions in which an unidentified voice offers various acrimonious, yet impersonal, sociopolitical commentaries like the following: "Today the news, papers and TV, report scene after scene of hatred prejudice and violence while our governors or rulers make laws which forbid the representation of violence" (50). With regard neither to character consistency nor to conventional narrative linearity, "Rimbaud" intersects voice upon voice and story upon story. Each voice and each story gestures toward the other, extends the other in a contiguity that reveals the historical and political through the private and personal.

In other words, Acker's audacious experimentations with intertext allow her to fashion on a formal level a historical consciousness or a *collective* subjectivity of marginality. The intertextuality of *In Memoriam to Identity* is politically performative in the sense that it affirms and testifies to the existence of a larger *counter-tradition* signifying shared resistance to normative productions of sexuality and of art. Her intertext indicates the possibility of a larger social subjectivity in heterogeneity. Because Acker's protagonist-voices never consciously mobilize in the novel as a political group larger than that of the couple, the intertextual design of the fiction becomes of prime importance as a symbolic function of a larger community and lineage of marginality. Acker herself states in "A Few Notes," that literary method has become a crucial preoccupation of the politically committed artist: "Method," she writes, "has become supremely politically important" (11).

Part 2: Acker's Intellectual Relationship with French Feminism and with Bakhtin and Deleuze and Guattari

Language is community [...]. I'm now inventing a community for you and me [...].
Kathy Acker, *Don Quixote* 191

I take books; [...] I am searching: somewhere there must be people who are like me in their rebellion and in their hope.
Hélène Cixous, "Sorties" 72

Acker constructs a novelistic constellation of intertextual voices and her work furthermore invites us to view her as writing within a larger alternate community of diverse but politically like-minded writers. Acker's aesthetic and political preoccupations connect her to various radical (mostly French) theorists of subjectivity, sexuality, and language. I have mentioned Kristeva already in relation to Acker and I want to extend that discussion in terms of Kristeva's notion of the "semiotic," and propose in addition what I see as some of the intellectual affinities between Acker, Bakhtin, Irigaray, Cixous, Deleuze and Guattari. This grouping of scholars and thinkers is not an arbitrary one in that each of the above writers interilluminates and philosophically engages the other.

Kristeva's view, for instance, of the "semiotic," which she advances in her difficult book, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, becomes more accessible when read alongside Acker's *In Memoriam*. And likewise, Kristeva's work gives us a language through which we might conceptualize Acker's avant-garde, literary experimentalism. Although Kristeva's text has largely fallen out of critical favor, its contemporary relevance is nonetheless highlighted by Acker's experimental fiction. In brief, Kristeva sees the semiotic as "a signifying practice" transgressing conventional symbolic and syntactical coherence through the multiplicity and undecidability of poetic language (15). Kristeva argues that the linguistic ruptures characterizing the semiotic "constitute changes in the *status of the subject*—his relation to the body, to others, and to objects" (15). Kristeva sees the semiotic in the marginal language of the literary avant-garde and implies that it is the place of the cut, "the place where [...the subject's] unity succumbs" (28). She furthermore argues that "intertextuality," or what she prefers to call the "*transposition* [...] from one signifying system to another," is "the result of a semiotic polyvalence—an adherence to different sign systems" (60). *In Memoriam*'s intersubjective voices validate novelistically Kristeva's theoretical conceptualization of "semiotic polyvalence." "Rimbaud's" literary experimentalism seeks, as we have seen, to articulate a new subjective multiplicity. In Kristeva's terms, then, Acker *transposes* "different sign systems" into her novel, whether they belong to Rimbaud, to Baudelaire, or to the more historically distant Murasaki Shikibu.

Kristeva's indebtedness to Bakhtin's philosophy is often noted.[10] And perhaps not surprisingly Bakhtin's theorizing of literary polyphony as a method of artistic construction dialoguing "different times, [and] epochs" (*Dialogic* 365) also has clear philosophic relevance to *In Memoriam*, which brings together discourses—albeit, primarily marginal ones—spatially and temporally dissociated. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin contends that the polyphonic novel "is contradictory, multispeeched and heterogeneous." It is "openended," he says, and characterized both by the "dialogue of languages" and by the "inability to say anything once and for all." In such texts, continues Bakhtin, "plot itself is subordinated to the task of coordinating and exposing languages to each other. [...] What is realized in the novel is the process of coming to know one's own language as it is perceived in someone else's language [...]. There takes place within the [polyphonic] novel an ideological translation of another's language" (365).

Bakhtin's comments help explain, I think, Acker's subordination of story to form as a polyphonic function. His theories can perhaps also be seen as lending philosophical rationale for Acker's own plagiaristic relationship with other novelistic and poetic discourses. In other words, Bakhtin's theorizing of the novelistic subject him- or herself as always epistemologically dependent upon the languages of others is relevant to *In Memoriam to Identity*, where R's subjectivity becomes "known," in a Bakhtinian sense, only in refractive passage through various other voices. Yet, simultaneously, one of the destabilizing effects of Acker's double-voiced and even triple-voiced narration is the continual deferral of a definitive ending of the protagonist's quest for an alternate subjectivity. To use Bakhtin's terms, the "openendedness" or seeming "unfinalizability"[11] of the narrative trajectory is intensified by the persistent juxtaposition of R's desire "to find a possible place for us: the place and the formula," with his concomitant but contrary resignation that, "I don't think it's possible for us to go anywhere. Actuality's against us" (*In Mem* 74, 61).

Deleuze and Guattari provide another language through which *In Memoriam to Identity* might be discussed. Rosi Braidotti, in her book *Nomadic Subjects*, notes Acker's

"Deleuzian flair for the reversibility of situations and people—her borderline capacity to [...] cut across an infinity of 'others'" (28). In an interview with Sylvère Lotringer given during the writing of *In Memoriam*, Acker herself frankly acknowledges her indebtedness to "the French philosophes," specifically Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari, for giving her a language through which she "could go farther" ("Devoured by Myths"10). She imagines herself in literary community with the French scholars saying, "when I read *Anti-Oedipus* and Foucault's work, suddenly I had this whole language at my disposal. [...] I remember thinking, Why don't they know me?" (10). Deleuze and Guattari's utopically accented conceptualization of a "plane of consistency [that] ties together heterogeneous disparate elements" (*A Thousand* 507) offers philosophic support for Acker's artistic construction of a constellation of differently marginalized voices. As well, Deleuze and Guattari's related philosophy of the subject's nomadic "deterritorializations,"[12] or escapes from homogenous and oppressive signifying systems, finds narrative correspondence in *In Memoriam to Identity*. We have seen already that R escapes homogenous subjective inscriptions through subversive acts of reading and writing. He seeks escape in addition through *literal* as well as *metaphysical* nomadism. "Rimbaud," in fact, depicts the subject in constant travel and traces a geographic narrative path leading us and the figure of R from Charleville, to Paris, back to Charleville, back to Paris, to Brussels, to Quievrain, and back to Brussels again. One of Rimbaud's dreams leading him from "PA, then across to Colorado and Washington State, in order to arrive in southern California" (75) further contributes to the sense of a nomadic and provisional subjectivity in "schizophrenic" transit.[13] R's perpetual displacements can be appreciated as an opportunity for "becoming other" through repeated spatial relocations We can read R's literal and linguistic wanderlust through Bakhtin's view of the "openendedness" of the subject who never settles on anything. Or we can read R's constant travel through Kristeva's theorizing of the abject and "stray" self, who "is on a journey [...] the end of which keeps receding" (*Powers* 8). And we can perhaps also imagine R's constant physical derangements as literalizing Deleuze and Guattari's idea of psychic deterritorializations in which the subject's "desiring production" keeps him, "not stocked within an established order," but rather, always in reformative, fluid movement (*Anti-Oedipus* 116).

Cixous's seductive theorizing of an alternate, "libidinal economy" that does not "reproduce the system" but encourages a "complex, mobile, and open" subjectivity can also be read in relation to Acker's avant-garde literary production ("Sorties" 81, 72, 84). Like Acker, who constructs an intertext *in memoria* to autonomous identity and like Kristeva, who takes up the abject self "opposed to *I*," Cixous advocates a form of subjectivity that contains "an abundance of the other," "tears me apart," and breaks "the rigid law of individuation" ("Sorties" 84, 86, 96). Irigaray similarly rejects hierarchical subject-object relations which, she says, are "frozen in a predicate which would split the world in two" ("Wonder" 76). Irigaray's writing on wonder—as "a mourning for the self as an autarchic entity; [...as] the advent or the event of the other. [...as the] beginning of a new story? [...] a new place" ("Wonder" 75-77)—reverberates linguistically when read alongside Acker's "Rimbaud." Acker is sometimes criticized for her lack of philosophic affirmation—for her disruptions, for her darkly disturbing presentations of bruised bodies and minds without any possibility of healing.[14] And granted, Acker's characters often submit to failure and defeat, and their stories end on dejected notes like R's disheartened repudiation, "I don't belong anywhere [...]. Fuck Verlaine. [...] *Fuck everything*" (94-95). Acker's texts by no means offer false, subjective redemptions or utopian resolutions. However, where the protagonists may "finally" fail on the level of the story, Acker, I think, succeeds in bringing into being, on linguistic and formal levels, a textually viable community in marginality, a community of the wound. In addition, there *are* affirmative moments of wonder in the text—there *are* spaces of heterogeneous otherness like those Irigaray theorizes.

One compelling and artistically complex instance of "go[ing] into the spaces of wonder" (23), to borrow one of Acker's own phrases from her interview with Sylvère Lotringer, occurs when "R and V set out for parts unknown" and see the "sea for the first time" (76). The plurality and mental voluptuousness of R's linguistic response, of which I cite only a portion, reads as follows:

> R: "THE BEGINNING OF WORDS
>
> "From indigo strait to Ossian's seas, and over rose-orange sands which a winy sea washed, crystal boulevards, inhabited by poor young families who feed themselves on fruit-dealer fruits, crystal boulevards are beginning to rise up and intersect. [...]
>
> "Formed in an asphalt desert, straightaway totally disordered the sky flees with tablecloths of fogs drawn up [...] the mourning of the Ocean [...].
>
> "Today's a new day. Raise your head, boy. We've won. This deeply arched wooden bridge; [...] the stupid girl whose clothes make a lot of noise caught in the weeds at the bottom of the river (Ophelia, that part of me gone, mourned for, transformed. We can hope for transformation.) We've won. Skulls shine out

> from the pea-plants they're becoming: *The only nation is the nation of the imagination.*
>
> "[...] Here and there are those atrocious flowers whose name is 'Hearts and Mothers,' possessions of the ethereal aristocracies beyond the Rhine—Guaranian—still homes of ancient fairy tales. There are inns which won't open again—and there are knights on white horses whose hearts are pure. And, if you're not too overcome, there's the study of heaven: *SKY*. [...]
>
> The sea stunned R and V into silence. (76-77)

The profound signifying plurality of this passage initially stuns the reader into silence as well. The text confounds conventional commentary by offering a profusion of rapidly shifting signifiers and images without stable or sustained perspective. I read this part of the novel as producing, and I quote from Acker's "Critical Languages," "The languages of flux. Of uncertainty [...] of wonder" (*Bodies* 91-92). Acker's experimental prose reveals the subject as abandoning determined intellectual destination and as moving transformatively through several other selves and spaces. In the scene above, the self or subject keeps on enabling, keeps on becoming and making transitions where they do not seem possible. This extraordinary passage with its series of disjunctive signifiers and fluctuating possibilities has no discernible mimetic meaning, no single communicative function. It marks the entry into a new, semiotic language where "the beginning of words" is the paradoxical "silence" or unspeakability of an ever-expanding difference.

Despite the scene's provisionality and postrealist difficulty, it is governed by its own logic of multiplicity. The scene constructs out of radically disparate images a central metaphor of the subject in uncertain transit. It presents an alternate ontology in which being is always a becoming. In a language which subverts conventional spatiality and temporality (and which collapses gender, class, and race demarcations), R passes through whole populations and civilizations, through an abundance of mythological, legendary, literary, and historical others. With an affirmative—almost rhapsodic—linguistic emphasis upon transformation (in this textual world, "skulls shine [strangely] out of the pea-plants they're becoming"), Acker traces R's mental transfiguration from the Gaelic hero Ossian, to "poor young families," to Shakespeare's Ophelia, to "aristocracies beyond the Rhine," to the Guaranian Indians of Paraguay, to "knights on white horses whose hearts are pure." There are also topographical shifts from seas, to straits, to deserts, to oceans, to rivers, and to skies, all of which overwhelm the reader but simultaneously instance wonder in an Irigarayan sense. In Acker's fiction, temporal, topographical, racial, and genderic boundaries become provocatively inconsequential. The scene by the sea pushes the limits not only of the self, of language, of time, and of space, but it pushes also the ideological limits of the "nation" so that "[t]he only nation" becomes a utopic one "of the imagination" where no single culture, gender, class, or race is privileged.[15] This scene dramatizes, then, a form of subjectivity that is radically decentered, displaced, and dispersed. Through the multi-directional rupturings of metaphoric composition, it inaugurates a new subjectivity in continuous, open production.

Part 3: The Feminine Voice and the Broadening of a Poetics and a Politics of Wounded Marginality

> *The problem [...] is: how to locate the means by which the female speaking subject has been excluded from [...] discourse [...], and to work out the conditions for her accession to speech and social existence. 'Identity' may be illusory, but men are still speaking, and speaking for and in the place of women.*
>
> Margaret Whitford, "Identity and Violence" 137

We have seen that "Rimbaud's" literary experimentalism and language of multiplicity seeks to announce an alternate model of subjectivity or, in Kristeva's terms, to signify "changes in the *status of the subject*." The *modus operandi* of the rest of the novel, including the sections "Airplane," "Capitol," and "The Wild Palms," is to continue to discover different voices that can also speak the periphery, reveal other forms of wounding, repression, and resistance, and extend the text's semiotic design. The voices of *In Memoriam*'s final three sections belong to two female protagonists: Airplane and Capitol. Although there is a loosening of personalities so that the text's central female subjectivities become partially blurred (specifically in "The Wild Palms"), Temple Drake of Faulkner's *Sanctuary* informs the voice of Airplane, while Caddy Compson of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Charlotte Rittenmeyer of Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* are the literary sources for Capitol's subjectivity. Acker's strategy of recontextualizing Faulkner's novels significantly involves, to put things in a Kristevean theoretical framework, *transposing*[16] "Rimbaud's" "sign system [...] into another" sign system "via an [...] intermediary common to the two systems" (*Rev* 60). In *In Memoriam*, various imagistic, linguistic, and thematic elements from the early section "Rimbaud" are *folded* into the novel's subsequent sections and function, thereby, as narrative structural "intermediaries." The novel's themes—those of incest, masochism, the roaming subject, the death of normative identity, and the melancholia produced by the disjunction between inner imaginings and the outside world—are all *transposed* into later novelistic parts. For example, like R who is masochistically open to abuse by his uncle African Pain, Capitol has an incestuous but strangely poignant relationship with her brother Quentin, who, she says, "was […] hurting penetrating opening me up, all that he shouldn't do especially to his own sister" (166). Also like R, for whom the "*only nation is the nation of the imagination*," Airplane, Acker writes late in the novel, "decided […to] roam" and to drift "into her imagination" because she had no place in a patriarchal society "she hated […] and […] hadn't made" (220-21). My point, then, is that "Rimbaud's" themes, tones, and critiques are reclaimed throughout the fiction, although differently from an alternate feminine standpoint.

"Rimbaud's" allusions, most strikingly those to blood and to swans, similarly recur later in the work. Whereas R speaks of "huge fucking swans," Capitol more poetically imagines that she "could hear everything. I could hear the feathers on swans' wings brushing over each other in an orgy. Of pride" (73, 209). Swans have mythic meaning throughout *In Memoriam*. "Rimbaud" refers to the classical, erotic story of Leda and the swan, to "A girl, Leda, [who] fucked a swan, had bestial sex" (77). And the protagonist Capitol, in a language sensitive and syntactically subversive, says: "I walked down to where the swans were. […] They came glided ran over to me [...]. 'Snake-necks' I called them. There is a myth" (160). Swans function as linguistic markers of sorts which interweave different narrative parts, and which signify both transformation and sexual freedom. *In Memoriam*'s complex references to blood, appearing in conjunction with each of the three central characters, likewise connect novelistic sections. Capitol, for instance, seeks escape from a patriarchal, familial economy that configures menstrual blood negatively as feminine impurity. She is aware both of her father's view that, "women are diseased and [...] *their own flesh and blood curses them*," and also of the fact that her own menstruation and sexuality threaten masculinist idealizations of women as "perfect enclosures" (156, 166). Her blood exceeds "proper" patriarchal boundaries and its meaning is, consequently, repressed and subject to inane resignification: "when the blood had first come down between my legs," she says, "I had been told it was carrot juice" (171). Airplane is also explicitly associated with blood. Following her rape and subsequent sexual commodification in the sex shows at *Fun City*, she becomes sick "*down there in the blood*" (133). While blood symbolizes both feminine abjection and victimization, on a more affirmative signifying level it simultaneously indicates an alternate, intuitive awareness as implied by Capitol's following remark: "despite all my reason, my blood knew doom" (159). Blood additionally indicates subjective strength as evidenced by Airplane's defiant declaration, "No, I wasn't ashamed of myself. [...] I sensed that blood is who I am," and by R's related decision "that if [...] he wasn't blood, [...he] wasn't anything" (117, 9). In the novel's imagistic patterning, then, blood (and the pollution, wounding, and abjection it signifies culturally) is taken up collectively by the text's central voices and is transformed semantically, or semiotically, into a sign subversive of the dominant, rational order.

Also interlinking the different narrative divisions is the fact that R reappears as a character in "Capitol" and as a literary memory in both "Capitol" and "The Wild Palms." However, there is a strange shift in R's nature when he reappears in "Capitol": his poetic sensitivity is displaced as he metamorphoses into the character Jason, Caddy Compson's vicious and power-using brother from Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Jason or Rimbaud, as Acker ambiguously calls him, thinks "that poetry is dead in this modern world" and, disillusioned, he no longer opens toward any other: "He was now no longer part of their world, misfits losers vulnerable fucked-over; he was never going to be fucked again" (192, 188). This subjective alteration reveals perhaps one of the perils of cultivating a dialogical capacity to assume others' identities: one risks contemptible, unethical becomings. And sadly, in fact, R's transformation into Jason has some biographical veracity in that the historical figure Rimbaud abandoned poetry at the approximate age of twenty-one and turned, prosaically, to the arms trade in Arabia and Abyssinia (Fowlie 55-57). Acker's Jason/Rimbaud deals also in "small arms and ammunition," and seeks in addition to capitalize on his own sister's body which he views as usable, "garbage […] female flesh" (199, 178).

In opposition, though, to R's troubling personality shift, both Capitol and Airplane remember the "original" Rimbaud and attempt to extend his transgressions into a specifically feminist erotics and poetics. Capitol taunts her abusive brother by telling him that the historical figure Rimbaud, "trained his soul, his heart [...] to strange [...] wanderings. Following dreams—his loves—which came to him by chance" (179, 184). But while asserting on the same occasion that "poetry is rebellion," she furthermore declares that "females [...] are more poets than males" (183). Airplane's related announcements similarly recall Rimbaud's nineteenth-century poetic philosophy, but nonetheless give priority to femininity by embracing the construction of woman as other: "Rimbaud had said, 'I am an *other.*' [...] But Rimbaud wasn't a woman. Perhaps there is no other to be and that's where I'm going," she states (226). Like Rimbaud, Capitol and Airplane articulate shared poetic desires for an alternate existence in which people "go outside the law, [to] find something else, maybe themselves" (155). Both female characters pay mental homage to the poet Rimbaud and, thus, to the history of the wounded margins. Yet, they seek also a more expansive rearticulation of the periphery to include other knowledge—to include feminine experience and defiance as well.

Both women protagonists initially express resistance to confining social structures through erotic agency and through promiscuity. Both Capitol and Airplane aim to be active sexual subjects rather than the traditionally passive and commodified objects of male viewership and desire. They struggle as well to dictate their own stories and their own futures. In the following textual sequence, taken from "Airplane's" early pages, Acker thematizes transformation attained through extreme erotic transgression:

> When I was a girl, the strongest feeling in me was to go out. [...] As far out as I could go [...]. Then beyond. [...] I didn't know what *out* meant, or it was this feeling I had in me. Like banging my head against a brick wall. Doing anything really stupid or really repetitive or sex was an easy way (at that time) to get out of jail.

> Once out, then everything mad and all shining, wet. I actually saw angels rise out of the bottom of the sky of night [...].
>
> I am scared of the unknown and I love it. This is my sexuality. [...]
>
> Somewhere in sexuality was her strength. (99, 106, 114)

These sentences (excepting the third person, authorial comment ending the passage) are spoken in Airplane's retrospective first person voice. "To go out" is Airplane's euphemism for exploring possibilities to their limits, and for the boundary-breaking impulses of her own sexuality. Defying the established order, breaking out of the "jail" Airplane mentions, entails a self-negation ("banging my head against a brick wall"), and involves also a perceptual transcendence in which "angels rise out of the bottom of the night sky." Airplane's subversiveness is, indeed, contradictory in that it performs a self-destructive powerlessness while simultaneously confirming, through metaphor, the transformative power of sociosexual treason. As the above lines indicate, Acker's early portrayal of Airplane directs our attention, as it has been directed before in "Rimbaud," explicitly to the ambiguities and difficulties of resistance.

As the fiction progresses, such difficulties intensify with Airplane's victimization in various, violent sexual scenarios. She is raped in a "crumbling house" that "smelled like there had been whore murders and pimp deals and other unspeakable acts going on inside its walls" (101). Her rapist then pimps her as a stripper and she is forced to work in "service to sexuality" at *Fun City* (124). She acquires a painful sexual infection, becomes "sick between her legs [...] hurt, down there, in the ocean, in waves" (126, 131). She is mistreated by what Acker critiques as an ineffectual American medical profession.

And she becomes "junked-up" in order to evade the ugly reality of "a life of disease and sex show" (133). Raped, commodified, and wasted, Airplane's narrative quickly becomes a depressive one of trauma, wounding, marginality, and powerlessness. The strength of her resilience, however, is such that she begins to conceive new forms of sexual and sociopolitical defiance that would be relevant to, as well as dramatizable in, the context of her immense oppression. Occupying a delegitimized cultural position as a usable and abusable feminine body, resistance for Airplane is initially limited to imaginative "poetic" refusals to accept unequivocally her own degradation. In the devastating aftermath of her rape, for instance, although she "was clinging to [...her rapist] because she had decided to survive," she also internally and optimistically affirms in language of metaphoric potentiality that, "I'm alive! I'm alive! Even the dirt in this landscape grows" (114, 115). During her life as a stripper when she is "hurt [...] profoundly," Airplane similarly articulates frustrated aspirations for productive transformation: "I *had* to change something. I didn't know how else to change it except by wanting to change" (143).

Airplane's inner expressions of desire and her private "act[s] of rebellion" ultimately assume external and material formation (142). Airplane uses her performance in the sex-shows themselves, where the audience of "men or shadows of men [...] had become only eyes" (123), as an ironic opportunity for the creative disavowal of feminine sexual objectification, and also for foregrounding and subverting the power politics of heterosexuality. In a chapter of the novel provocatively entitled "American Eyes," Acker depicts a "sex-play" or stripper routine of doctor-patient in which Airplane plays "a *very* young, innocent girl" seeking help for her disconcerting sense that she "'see[s] men [watching her] all the time'" (137, 134). In the play, the doctor responds doubtfully to Airplane commenting that "'If there were men watching you commit private acts in the privacy of your own home, men would be rapists'" (134). Airplane then turns to the "sex-play audience" questioning and confronting them as follows: "'Do you know what I'm doing right now? You can't see my right hand, can you? That's cause it's hidden [...] in just a mass of oozing squishing flesh [...]. You can't know what I'm feeling, can you? I'm flesh. [...] you're all animals [...]. I love it in here. I can be here and you can't. [...] You're watching me, aren't you?'" (135-36).

In an essay on *In Memoriam*'s obscene and "pornographic" aesthetic, entitled "Simulating Sex and Imagining Mothers," Colleen Kennedy recognizes Acker as an "avowedly feminist" novelist, but objects to the graphic sexuality of scenes like the one above on the grounds that such representations reproduce damaging gender relations and reinscribe oppressive consciousness (166). She argues that "*Not* to find [...such] passages offensive is to serve unreflectingly the patriarchal establishment that determines relationships between men and women as, shall we say, problematic" (171). Acker's various scenes of wounding, rape, incest, domestic violence, and sexual commodification are, certainly, most unsettling given the traumatizations and feminine degradations they invoke. However, far from merely reproducing oppressive structures, Acker's pornographic episodes in fact explore the conflicted status of subjects who are, by context, necessarily subjected. Acker's explicit sexual material is, in addition, more aptly viewed as engendering both cultural complicity *and* critique in that it intervenes parodically within existing representation, and offers not falsely emancipatory narrative tropes, but, as I hope to show, a disruptive and viable oppositional praxis.[17]

Airplane's sex-routine can be read, partly at least, as an artistic enactment of the experience of exposure, in which the power of the male gaze is disrupted and appropriated to the extent that the audience members themselves become the parodic objects of subjective feminine contemplation. Airplane's sardonic interrogations of the viewers—"You're watching me, aren't you?"—function not only to transform the men's supposed absence in the scene into a problematic presence, but they serve also to perform a symbolic reappropriation of power by refocusing the dramatic perspective or by redirecting the gaze. As in a conventional sex-show, the emphasis of Acker's sex simulation is on the private made public—on the feminine body open for view by "American eyes." However, Airplane's sex-routine challenges limiting pornographic contexts by subversively staging such a bodily display as a reflection of a national male pathology of imperiling consequence to women. Lines like the doctor's, "If there were men watching you commit private acts [...] men would be rapists," have a provocatively defetishizing dramatic effect. Airplane's sex-show works, furthermore, to derail appropriative male desire by performing a masturbatory feminine eroticism that conceals more than it reveals. Although her verbal taunts—"You can't know what I'm feeling, can you. I'm flesh. [...] I can be here and you can't"—participate in the patriarchal discursive practice of identifying materiality with femininity, they simultaneously destabilize certain pornographic constructions of the openly assailable female body. In her sex-performance, Airplane, to use her own militant terms seeks to "go along with a men's world and then kill it" (126). For Acker, textualizing such intense ambivalence is a matter of writing through the repressions of the feminine margins in order to expose and subvert the power relations at work in the patriarchal sexual economy, and to begin also to forge a somatic and social feminine subject position that compels recognition.

However, despite Airplane's use of pornography for feminist purposes and despite her challenge to its gendered script of male visual consumption of the feminine, in her depressive retrospective account of her life as a stripper she voices an immense negativity:

> Time wasn't dead yet so I wasn't free. Yet. As soon as I got home, I got into bed. I just happened to look up, one time, time going so slowly, drop by drop, the blood leaking out of my heart, and saw him [her rapist-boyfriend] standing there, looking down at me. I didn't want to see him, or I didn't want to see anything, cause there was nothing to see. (141-42)

These lines overwhelm with their nihilistic expression of freedom from sexual victimization only through death. They are troubling given their depiction of the process of dying and given their derailment of Airplane's quest for agency. Her creative negotiations within culturally scripted representations lead bathetically to the bluntly defeatist and drained recognition that, "there [...is] nothing." Airplane's lapse into melancholia results perhaps from the enormous difficulties faced when trying to alter existing and damaging cultural formations and signifying practices. We have seen the problematics of this struggle earlier in "Rimbaud" along with the corresponding tonal vacillations from despair to promise to despair again. *In Memoriam*'s narrative foregrounding of the dissonant possibilities and impossibilities of meaningful intervention makes it apt, I think, to speak not simply of Acker's literary defiance or of her subversive artistic practices, but of her ambiguous, novelistic *aporias of resistance.*[18] Stated otherwise, *In Memoriam* confronts us with a difficult paradox: the quest for something new involves the mimetic repetition of the old. The novel's dissonant voices must often consequently acknowledge their own participation in precisely what they defy.

With an eye to the contradictions and difficulties in the quest to convert the margins from a site of pain and wounding to one of power, there are other textual manifestations of Airplane's resistance that deserve brief attention for their philosophic affirmations. The fact that Airplane recovers physically and finally escapes both the sex shows and her rapist-boyfriend is one of Acker's most definitive examples of triumphant opposition. Also optimistic is the end of the section entitled "Airplane" in which images of death and mourning give way to a more positive linguistic emphasis upon mythopoeic and transformative self-creation: "'I'm trying to learn a new language,' she thought to herself. [...] 'If I'm going to survive, I have to save myself. [...] The human I was making had a will as strong as a god's, like those gods in Norse mythology, cause the one I was making had to'" (146, 149). Airplane's comments are important not only because they articulate notions of the subject in construction, but also because they voice a major preoccupation of *In Memoriam*: the conversion of marginality or woundedness into a powerful, self-engendered poetics.

Capitol explicitly takes up the theme of the margins' self-authorship in the next section of the fiction. Recognizing the importance of her own entry into the symbolic sphere, Capitol demands the subversion of a cultural tradition in which Woman is created but not creative. In an implicit critique of Faulkner's literary practice of representing women through masculine subjectivity, Capitol asks: "*Who am I?* That's not quite the question which I keep asking myself over and over. *What's my story?* That's it. Not the stories they've been and keep handing me. My story" (154). Although Acker draws upon the feminine sexual subversiveness already present in Faulkner's novels, she nonetheless has an ideological bone to pick with Faulkner's persistent use of a masculinist, narrative point of view in which women remain object and never subject of the discourse. Acker attempts in *In Memoriam* to write a more aggressively politicized version of Faulkner's stories by giving her female protagonists their *own* extended first person voices, and by granting them, thereby, the opportunity to produce their own narratives, reimagine inherited literary scripts, and take an activist stance against their own sociosexual oppression. Later in the novel, Capitol in fact becomes activist through artistic production. She channels her feminist critique and desire for self-articulation into a career of avant-garde performance art: "Capitol worked and worked because working (making smashing dolls) was her and her had never before been. [...] Now in her work she smashed up dolls and remade the pieces, as one must remake oneself, into the most [...] abstract nonunderstandable conglomerations possible which certain people saw as beautiful" (231, 249). Apart from Acker's playful autobiographic intimations, these lines are important because they thematize self-enunciation and innovative artistic production as crucial, political processes.

For Acker, then, feminine self-symbolization is a matter of narrative perspective or of making subjects out of former objects. But it is a linguistic and formal matter as well. Or, as Airplane says, it is a matter of "building a new life. Not in terms of content, but form" (244). In the novel's last section, "The Wild Palms," Acker constructs the feminine periphery through an intensified literary disruptiveness. "The Wild Palms" is structurally ambivalent in that it moves between rendering Airplane's experiences and those of Capitol. The periodic and unexplained mingling of the two protagonists' memories creates a distinct sense of shared experience. Acker's divided narrative attention *within* "The Wild Palms" also allows the section's marked linguistic experimentations to express a unified female defiance of official discourse. In brief, Acker's avant-garde literary strategies and disruptions include the following: the reorganization of normal word order ("Because was walking so early in the morning and seeing a light I had never before seen or because wasn't alone and with him, I was lost" [235]), the incorporation of non-grammatical usage ("Since I had never known a father because the judge. Before I was born, I knew only absence" [219]), the displacement of proper pronouns ("For days wandered through the city. [...] If close my eyes, there is no end to these days" [237]), the use of literary fragmentation ("There. No Friends, there were some, penetrated hers" [218]), and the intermixing of vulgarity with highly cultured discourse ("Told her to come slipped her fingers under her ass to cunt lips, [...] I lose myself, in putting down memories, in writing, but I don't escape the fatality of the events, their weight and their irreversibility" [255-56]).

On one level, the various linguistic disintegrations signal the pain, confusion, and victimization of the margins. However, the pervasive literary transgressions can also be seen as demonstrating the creative and sustained coming into being of the language of the dispossessed. Elaine Scarry's theoretical work, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, examines the relationship of oppression and language, and sheds light, I think, on Acker's *In Memoriam*. Although Scarry writes about the body *in extremis* under authoritarian regimes, her discussion of the relationship of pain and innovative literary expression is nonetheless relevant to Acker's experimental presentations of both physical and mental trauma. Scarry's thesis is that torture is a language-destroying experience (an *unmaking*) that reduces the victim to a body without a voice. Part of the healing process, she writes, is to *make* the world again through language, "to restore to each person tortured his or her voice, to use language to let pain give an accurate account of itself" (50). Scarry argues, moreover, that to "bring together [...] the body, the locus of pain [...with] the voice, the locus of power" is a politically powerful act of "self-transforming objectification" (51, 166). She writes that, "to be present when the person in pain rediscovers speech and so regains his powers of self-objectification is almost to be present at the [...] rebirth of language" (172). Scarry also addresses the importance of cultural production, or of what she call the "artifact," for its ability on a public and *collective* level to "re-construct" the world "in such a way that it must be reseen" (172). Scarry's account of the transformative potential of pain's articulation offers a provocative way to read *In Memoriam to Identity* which gives powerful voice to the feminine body and to the social periphery. Acker writes testimonials of trauma and inhabits oppressed wounded voices. But more importantly she opens new forms of enunciation through an alternate, multi-voiced or collective aesthetics of the periphery. Her protagonists' ruptured language symbolizes both the repressions and resistances of the margins. In Scarry's terms, Acker's literary disintegrations suggest both the unmaking and the experimental remaking of the world.

Conclusion

Through *In Memoriam's* politically engaged literary experimentalism, Acker produces an intellectually challenging oppositional poetics. Acker's complex intertext allows her to bring together different peripheral voices and to imagine a viable, collective subjectivity in marginality, or an intersubjective sociality of the wound. The contention aroused by her work issues from the fact that she takes up rather than averts the violent oppression wreaked upon the margins, and textualizes also the ambivalent complexities of trying to turn pain into a new, productive state. Although *In Memoriam to Identity* narrates explicit scenes of negativity, brutality, and weariness, Acker's attempt to open up literary spaces to the cultural underside contains a provocative affirmation. Acker trashes proper linguistic and formal arrangements, but she does so with the positive artistic impulse of constructing an innovative poetic language capable of giving voice to the social periphery in all of its deeply ambiguous complexity.

Notes

1. A version of this chapter has been published previously in *Literature Interpretation Theory*, v. 12 (2001): 205-33.

2. The term "intertextuality" is used variously. While some scholars employ it in the limited sense of literary influence and allusion, its meaning, as developed largely by Julia Kristeva, is much more complex. In Kristeva's formulation, the term implies that texts, far from being enclosed systems, ought to be considered in their historico-cultural signification. For Kristeva, each text is a site of diverse discursive interaction—"a redistribution of several different sign systems" resulting in a new articulation (*Rev* 59). To avoid the confusion of the term "intertextuality" with the "banal sense of 'study of sources'" (*Rev* 60), Kristeva, at least in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, chooses "transposition" as the privileged word for specifying how the producing text situates itself in relation to other signifying systems. Apart from terminological issues, however, it is noteworthy that Acker enunciates a similar view of the text as discursive conjuncture: "all texts," she writes, "refer to other texts. Meaning is a network, not a centralized icon" ("Critical Languages" 83). Acker in fact takes this idea of textual cross-referencing to extreme novelistic formation. I qualify Acker's intertextuality as "plagiaristic" *not* because she uses other artists' material without acknowledgement, but because she practices a radical form of appropriative authorship ("I [...] just bloody copy straight on," she says to Sylvère Lotringer in "Devoured by Myths" [11]), which allows her to construct a new version of an old text by, as she says, "taking it and putting it together again" ("Devoured" 16). See Part 2 of this essay for a further discussion of the relationship of Acker's artistic methods and early Kristevean scholarship.

3. Joseph Tabbi, for example, writes briefly of Acker's "explicit novelistic deconstructions" of past works (95). Kathleen Hulley more amply and aggressively argues that when Acker "steals from canonized authors, she doesn't simply appropriate, she obliterates, scrawling another text across the original, blurring its outlines, assumptions, themes" (178). Robert Latham is more ambivalent about the implications of Acker's intertext, suggesting that her plagiaristic strategies mark "at once a defacement of literature and a redemption of it" ("Collage as Critique" 55). And most recently, Linda S. Kauffman has allowed that Acker's work "distills some fundamental kernel from the original text" (211).

4. Rimbaud' s famous declaration occurs in a letter to Georges Izambard dated May 13, 1871. See *Arthur Rimbaud: Complete Works* page 100.

5. In her interview with Sylvère Lotringer, "Devoured by Myths," Acker discusses explicitly her avant-garde, mythopoeic aesthetic intent and says that she is inspired by Rimbaud, whose work she sees as offering "one of the first major poetic myths for us" (22).

6. In *In Memoriam to Identity*, the term "Rimbaud" is used variously. In order to avoid possible confusion, I use "Rimbaud" in quotation marks to indicate the novel's first part and Rimbaud without quotation marks to signify the historical figure and nineteenth-century French poet. When referring to *In Memoriam*'s fictionalized version of Rimbaud I use the acronym R, as is Acker's usual practice.

7. Acker's use of acronyms is a means of destabilizing the notion of the established, proper self or of signalling the subversion of the limiting and burdensome propriety of identity.

8. The concept of "double-voicing" comes from Bakhtin's stylistic analysis of novelistic discourse. In brief, "double-voiced" narrative eschews authorial hegemony, or a single interpretive textual center, and constructs instead a fuller bi-valency by including the other's voice *within* itself. Bakhtin distinguishes different kinds of relationships of both agreement and disagreement between the speaker and the other in double-voicing. See page 199 of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* for further clarification.

9. It is noteworthy that Acker occasionally uses actual parenthesis and occasionally even parenthesis within parenthesis as subversive stylistic markers, whereby new ideological perspectives can be voiced within or alongside the "primary" ones. See page 220 of *In Memoriam* for an example of this kind of stylistic play disruptive of univocality.

10. See, for example, John Lechte's entry on Julia Kristeva in his book, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*.

11. "Unfinalizability" is a term belonging to Bakhtin's vocabulary of dialogism and his theory of the subject. For Bakhtin, the novel as a genre is characterized by "a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality" (*The Dialogic* 7). The novel is, furthermore, dialogical or "unfinished" in that the novelistic "hero" exists not in a static condition of being but in a dynamic state of ongoing becoming.

12. Deleuze and Guattari's terms, "deterritorialization" and "plane of consistency," appear throughout their books, *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*. Both works critique the social repression of the desiring body, and its subjection to the processes of oedipalization or "territorialization" in the service of becoming the "clean and proper" body of heterosexual, reproductive functioning. In opposition to utilitarian views of sexuality, Deleuze and Guattari advocate a form of "desiring-production" taking place on what they call a "plane" of libidinal emancipation (a space of "deterritorialization") where heterogeneous, disparate subjects circulate freely but nonetheless collectively.

13. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari in fact privilege the condition of schizophrenia in which the subject has not been fully oedipalized or inaugurated into the symbolic

world of language and the law. Deleuze and Guattari exalt the schizophrenic's psychic nomadism among other characteristics: "The schizo," they write, "knows how to leave [...]. But at the same time his journey is strangely stationary, in place. He does not speak of another world, he is not from another world: even when he is displacing himself in space, his is a journey in intensity, [...] Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be breakthrough" (131). Although theoretical idealizations of schizophrenia sometimes problematically disregard actual psychiatric dysfunction, Acker's experimental departure from literary realism and from traditional plotted narrative lends itself, in some sense, to the use of the term.

14. For instance, B. W. Powe in his Toronto *Globe and Mail* review of *My Mother: Demonology* makes the following lament: "I began reading Kathy Acker's *My Mother: Demonology* and had the sensation that I was reading her earlier books, *Empire of the Senseless* and *In Memoriam to Identity*, again. [...] images seemed to be transplanted from other books, each work melding into a single subversive text, a descent into an American hell with no signs yet of an ascent, a transformation, or even an escape" (C19).

15. The terms "imagination," "myth," and "dream" are all important, interrelated, and frequently recurring metonyms in both Acker's fictional and critical writing. These terms normally have some utopic connotation but are without reference to any notion of good or evil. They usually evoke that which is outside of or unappropriated by dominant, symbolic systems. As Acker herself puts it: "In the society of law, dream, sexuality, fantasy, imagination, and art exist outside of the Logos" ("Good and Evil, *Bodies* 35).

16. Kristeva, as I have noted, uses "transposition" to indicate the rearticulation of different texts whether they be poetic, novelistic, or theoretical into a new signification. I am using Kristeva's term slightly differently in this section of my chapter to suggest that such negotiations might occur not only between texts, but also on a smaller scale within them as a means of pushing signifying limits.

17. Various pro-pornography feminists can be imagined as lending theoretical support to Acker's work. For instance, Angela Carter claims that, "pornography [can be put] in the service of women" (37). Lynn Hunt more recently contends that there is a strong connection "between pornography and political subversion" (35). Hunt identifies the rise of political pornography largely with French Revolutionary philosophy, and argues that, "Pornography developed democratic implications because of its association with print culture [...] and with political attacks on the powers of established regimes" (43-44). As well, in an essay specifically addressing Kathy Acker and Colleen Kennedy's unfavorable critique of Acker, pro-pornography feminist Nicola Pitchford maintains that political intervention is possible only within available cultural representation. The anti-porn feminist "tendency," she says, "to treat all representation as necessarily reproducing oppressive consciousness results in a static, oppositional model of difference that leaves women without agency" (7).

18. In their *Dictionary of Poetic Terms*, Jack Myers and Michael Simms define "aporia" as "a self-doubting argumentative soliloquy" (22). In *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, Christopher Norris more elaborately explains "aporia" as "the point at which thought encounters [...a] self-engendered paradox [...] beyond which it cannot press [...]. *Aporia* derives from the Greek word meaning 'unpassable path'" (49). Norris's suggestion is that narrative aporia occurs when a text functions within existing symbolic structures while claiming to dismantle them. Such ambivalence, he says, "opens [...texts] up to [...] deconstructive reading[s]" (48).

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CHAPTER FOUR:

Heterology, Sacrifice, Wonder, Community, and Death in Acker's *My Mother: Demonology*

Introduction

ALL BODIES ARE MUTILATED
Kathy Acker, *My Mother: Demonology* 161

In 1993, three years following the publication of *In Memoriam to Identity*, Acker published *My Mother: Demonology*, possibly her most political and aesthetically ambitious text. *Demonology* advances Acker's anarchistic assault on formal conventions, and extends her experimentations with language and intertext. Her attempt to provide a new language and aesthetic, a political poetics capable of articulating the disenfranchisement and heterogeneity of various marginalized voices, continues in Acker's penultimate novel, which draws largely upon the subversive life and avant-garde writing of French writer Colette Laure Lucienne Peignot. Narrative fragmentation is taken to extremes and pushed to the limit in *Demonology*, which makes reading the novel radically disorienting, and furthermore confounds critical evaluation. Having read Acker for years now, I still feel unprepared for the shock of reading *Demonology*, which at once repeats many of the innovative strategies of Acker's previous productions and manages somehow to produce a new, disruptive aesthetic experience. Yet, however discombobulating or demanding the text may be, *Demonology* nonetheless directly reveals the sadism of our times, and without ultimately fleeing the reality of embodiment that leads to death, Acker's fiction furthermore shows us how we might recover from traumatic loss. *My Mother: Demonology* in many ways furthers the political and aesthetic aspirations of Acker's previous novels, and it shares, moreover, certain ambitions with the novels of both Darcey Steinke and Laura Kasischke. Like Steinke's and Kasischke's fictions, Acker's *Demonology* enunciates a pronounced sense of orphanhood and exile, coupled with unsettling depictions of the girl both facing death, and struggling to escape sadistic victimization. Like Steinke's and Kasischke's texts, Acker's work furthermore highlights traumatic repetition, staging various traumatic returns partly as a means of forging a collective and historical victimhood, but more importantly as a means of vehemently denouncing (even textually exorcising) repressive sociosexual and political structures in order to move beyond them, and glimpse a new future possibility. Like *Jesus Saves* and *Suspicious River*, then, *My Mother: Demonology* contains utopian impulses or, at the very least, liberatory images that must be acknowledged alongside the sometimes defeatist and nihilist textual sense. My purpose in this chapter is primarily threefold: first, I discuss briefly the avant-garde tradition in which Acker places herself (and which she extends) in *Demonology*; second, I read her text as a trauma narrative with an understated but nonetheless viable utopian function. And third, I consider the troubling turn to death at the fiction's close not necessarily as a sign of defeat, but rather as a possible and paradoxical expression of community in negativity.

Part 1: Re-imagining the Surrealist Past

In her brief biographical preface to *Laure: The Collected Writings*, Jeanine Herman writes provocatively that Laure Peignot, born in 1903 in Paris, was a Catholic rich girl, consumptive poet, world explorer, masochist, and lover of Georges Bataille. Laure "denounced," writes Herman, "her bourgeois and religious upbringing," and made "[w]riting and dissolution [...] her revolt" ("Preface" vii). Herman also notes that Laure was "involved in Contre-Attaque, the leftist group" that advocated "revolution through sexual and moral upheaval," and also with the society Acéphale, whose well-known "symbol is a headless man, representing anarchy, a state without a head" (ix). Dying at the age of thirty-five at Bataille's Saint-Germain-en-Laye house, Laure left behind a collection of stories, poems, prose fragments and letters revealing, Herman argues, Bataille's (and other writers')[1] radical philosophic influence. Although Laure's life and writings (specifically her "Story of a Little Girl") function as the foremost inspiration for Acker's *Demonology*, Bataille's influence is also felt in Acker's work as it is felt in Laure's. In fact, Bataille along with André Breton (and not the less well known Laure) are the revolutionary figures most often discussed in relation to *My Mother: Demonology*.[2] In other words, Acker is seen, and in many ways rightly so, as inserting herself within the French surrealist traditions (of both Bataille and Breton) championing both social and aesthetic revolt, and pledged against "the principle of identity" to use Breton's terms, or against homogeneous existence and self-sufficiency to use Bataille's.[3] By ostensibly looking back to and remobilizing Breton's surrealist principles of love and liberation and his practices of dream recitals and automatic writing, as well as Bataille's surrealist visions of "the overturning of the established order" and the "practice of a rigorous moral liberty" ("The Use Value" 100, 99), Acker breaks profoundly with certain (and perhaps still circulating) assumptions and expectations regarding women's writing as being unconcerned with history, revolution, politics, or avant-garde experimentalism.

Although Acker's *Demonology* works partly in the "mad love"[4] Bretonian tradition of a quest narrative for love and simultaneous liberation from domestic safeness, Bataille and not Breton appears as a figure or character in the text,[5] and hence Bataille's philosophic influence on Acker is more noteworthy. Also suggesting that Acker's poetics are indebted more to Bataille are the many references and even tributes to him that occur in various essays in Acker's *Bodies of Work*, most notably in "Critical Languages," published just prior to *Demonology* originally in 1990. In "Critical Languages," Acker discusses Bataille's notion of acéphale (not the society or journal, but the figure itself) as a headless god with "a skull at the place of, in the place of, the genitalia," and the colon in labyrinthine form (90-91). Acker views Bataille's acephalic being as indicating forcibly how the "Logos must realize that it is a part of the body and that this body is limited. Subject, not to the mind, but to death" (90). In her essay, she also stresses the figuration of the labyrinth, in which "reason is useless" and "the self becomes lost." She writes: "This labyrinth is also the labyrinth of language. It is these languages that I want to begin to find" (91). Bataille's "acephalic" notions (expressed in "The Sacred Conspiracy" in *Visions of Excess* where André Masson's drawing of Acéphale in fact appears) about how it is "too late to be reasonable," and how "it is necessary to become completely different," "unaware of prohibition," and open "to a rapturous escape from the self" (179-181) clearly impact Acker's own theories about art and her own writing practice, which aspires toward "The Languages of the Body," as she announces in "Critical Languages," or "TOWARD A LITERATURE OF THE BODY" as she asserts more emphatically later in *Demonology* (114).

Beyond Bataille's notions of acéphale, his related but more extensive theory of heterology is also useful in discussing *Demonology*, and can be seen as intersecting intellectually in some way with the disruptive experience Acker's novel traces. As we saw in the introduction to this thesis, two key terms for Bataille are homogeneity and heterogeneity. To review briefly, for Bataille, the homogeneous realm is essentially the dominant, profane social order including the world of work and rational, productive expenditure. The heterogeneous or heterological, on the other hand, "is completely other" and aims toward loss and ultimately toward death ("The Use Value" 102). It is, moreover, a marker of separation and hence connected to the sacred. Bataille calls for both a heterological social practice (which would entail the abandonment of conventional or "appropriative" morality in favor of a new economy of sacrifice and loss) and a corresponding heterological aesthetics that would abandon conventional bourgeois social realism in favor of "the introduction of a lawless intellectual series into the world of legitimate thought" ("The Pineal" 80).

Although we cannot be certain that Acker wrote *Demonology* with Bataille's notion of heterology in mind, her work nonetheless reveals what heterology might actually look like on the levels both of textual aesthetics and also of actual practice. The novel's temporal and spatial non-synchronicity, the ambiguity about who is speaking, the labyrinthine narrative structure, the numerous encounters with violence, death, and strangeness, as well as the habitual descent into the realm of the irrational and of dream all create for the reader of *Demonology* a sense of radical dislocation, fragmentation, displacement, disidentity, and exile. And they furthermore introduce (to use Bataille's terms) "a lawless [...] series into the world of legitimate thought," into the world, in this case, of the novel. So in Acker's literary production, the novel (as a legitimate discursive, cultural formation) becomes a drastically expanded aesthetic experience that demands an extreme freedom from convention.

Not only does Acker's textual practice espouse the heterological through linguistic and narrative rupture, but her main protagonist Laure (who is in fact based largely but not exclusively upon Colette Laure Peignot) also participates in the heterological in profound ways by abandoning the known for the unknown, by escaping productive domesticity in favor of unproductive promiscuity, and by rejecting propriety for the wild and dissolute. The following passage taken from the first eleven pages of *Demonology*, begins by retextualizing "Story of a Little Girl," Laure Peignot's first-person, autobiographical text. Laure's oppositional positioning unfolds as follows:

> At age six, I suddenly took off for unknown regions, the regions of dreams and secret desires. Most of my life [...] I've been dissolute. [...] I was wild. Wild children are honest. [...] My body was all I had. *A a a a I don't know what language is. One one one one I shall never learn to count. [...] I'm always destroying everything including myself, which is what I want to do. [...]* I hadn't decided to be a person. I was almost refusing to become a person, because the moment I was, I would have to be lonely. [...] When I was twenty-three, it began to be possible for me to escape my parents. [...] A sailor is a man who keeps on approaching the limits of what is describable. I was wild. My brother was the first man who helped me. [...] At my brother's house I met [...] Paul Rendier [...]. Once I had fucked, the only thing I wanted was to give myself entirely and absolutely to another person. I didn't and don't know what this desire means other

> than itself. […] After Rendier, I threw myself onto every bed as a dead sailor flings himself into the sea. […] I had pushed my life to an edge. […] Now I had to push my life more. […] I had […] written: […]. '*From now on I'm going to decide for myself and live according to* my *decisions—decisions out of desire. I'll always look like a sailor who carries his huge cock in his hand. . . . I'll travel and travel by reading. I won't read in order to become more intelligent, but so that I can see as clearly as possible that there's too much lying and hypocrisy in this world. I knew from the first moment I was that I hated them, the hypocrites.'* (8-17)

In these early textual fragments, Laure, who is not explicitly named until late in the narrative on page 182, shows herself to be an improperly socialized and sexualized being outside of the Logos. She is explicit about her *déréliction* at the end of the text when she tells us that she's "a woman […] outside the accepted. Outside the Law, which is language" (253). Her identification early in the novel with the figure of the sailor signifies her heterological status, her position as outlaw heroine, who is both linguistically and sexually errant. These early pages of *Demonology* also imply the way in which the narrative is motivated by the desire for adventure, by alienation, by the need to risk self-loss, to risk narrative meaning itself, and motivated also by rebellion against "hypocrisy in this world." Most importantly, though, *Demonology*'s early pages suggest how resistance against authority must necessarily occur on symbolic and textual levels; they suggest how linguistic or literary lawlessness can be, as Bataille would argue, a form of political rebellion.

Part of the heterogeneity or heterological aesthetic of *Demonology* includes also the multivocality of the narrative voice, in which Acker's self becomes mixed strangely in the text with Laure's Parisian self. Although the central heroine Laure is not Acker, the close proximity between Acker and her main protagonist (the conflation of their voices and the mingling of their identities) is evident. In fact, Acker's protagonist's birth date and place (Oct. 6, 1945, New York) corresponds more closely to Acker's own biography and less to Colette Peignot's. Although Acker was not always forthcoming on this point, I have seen the years 1944, 1947 and 1948 all variously offered as her birth year.[6] Also, *My Mother: Demonology* traces Laure's actual travel from France to Germany to the Soviet Union, but it is simultaneously autobiographically allusive with its references to the American political milieu of the 1990's, and with its references also to Acker's own experience as a stripper, to her love of weightlifting and motorbike riding, and to her literary practice of plagiarizing porn novels, for instance, or giving readings and performances as a representative of the "the new American literature" that sees the political in the personal or "lyrical" (*Dem* 218, 237). What is produced, consequently, in *Demonology* is an ambiguous voice—a fractured subject of utterance that refuses, to use Laure's terms, the loneliness of separate identity.

In *Demonology*, many other voices are in fact blended or brought together with Acker/Laure's voice. For instance, the section of the narrative retextualizing Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and entitled "Obsession" (in which Laure "become[s] a man [...] name[d] [...] Heathcliff," who then becomes "an animal that didn't even clean itself" [116, 127]) metonymically extends Acker/Laure's already fractured voice to include as well Heathcliff's and Cathy's voices. In "Obsession," Acker provides a literary analysis of Brontë's text, while simultaneously highlighting *My Mother: Demonology*'s own themes of abjection, sexual obsession, the sadism of the family, the lie of separate identity, the tragedy of propriety and proprietorship, love outside the limits of the law, and the wonder and catastrophe of childhood, "when," as Acker writes, "I was destroyed. When all of us are all destroyed" (185). By tracing one narrative through another, Acker provides a collective memory of loss, pain, love, orphanhood, exile, rebellion, and revolution. Moreover, with its co-mingling of often variously distressed voices, Acker's text "reaches [heterologically] toward" what we might envision as "a wounded communication" of beings.[7] Put more prosaically, she creates a sense of historical continuity, a sense that heterological elements from the literary past can be remobilized in support of the present transgressive endeavor to contest the established order, and even ultimately, as we shall see, possibly to disarticulate oppressive socio-political patterns.

Laure Peignot's and Emily Brontë's texts are by no means the only works or discourses that Acker transposes into *My Mother: Demonology*; however, they do I think take center stage in the fiction over the other intertextual reworkings of or allusions to, for instance, the literature of T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Pauline Réage, Sade, Dante, or the films of Luis Bunuel as well as Dario Argento.[8] Although Acker provides a provocative collage of disparate discourses—literary, psychoanalytic, political, filmic, and pop-cultural as well—it is significant that Brontë and even more so Laure emerge as the literary focal points (the *very slippery* literary focal points, but focal points nonetheless) of the novel. We have seen that Bataille appears vaguely as a figure in *Demonology* (essentially, as an epistolary address) and that many of his avant-garde theories are implicitly recalled in the novel's themes and transgressions. Acker is certainly deeply committed to the "Black Tradition," as she calls it, of Bataille and other writers like Genet, Sade, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Blanchot, and Artaud among others. However, in her later works, specifically in *My Mother: Demonology* and in her performance piece *Eurydice in the Underworld*, she becomes increasingly concerned with finding and recovering an extant female avant-garde tradition, a tradition marginalized perhaps within the already marginal. So, for instance, in E*urydice in the Underworld*, although Acker clearly had in mind Maurice Blanchot's theories about the relationship of language and death, most of the intertextual allusions in *Eurydice* (as we will see in the next chapter) are to revolutionary women writers including Charlotte Brontë, Assia Djebar, and Marina Tsvetava. The text, then, reads in part as an assemblage or textual collective of dissident female writers' voices. *My Mother: Demonology* provides a similar retrieval or assembling of voices with Acker writing herself through Laure, who in turn imagines herself first through Dario Argento's film *Suspiria*, and then more fully through Emily Brontë in the form of her delinquent and subversive characters Heathcliff and Cathy. My point, then, is that in Acker's late texts (including *Demonology*) she becomes more intent on pointing to the ways in which women's writing has served as a radical element in the avant-garde; she is more intent on finding and recovering a female avant-garde authorship and lineage. Another way possibly of viewing the above is that in works like *Demonology*, part of Acker's project is to re-imagine the avant-garde, not as a masculine preserve, but rather as a "black" tradition whose contemporary survival implies the inclusion and not the forfeiture of a powerful female revolutionary element.

As a final note on Acker's feminist neo-avant-gardism, I would like briefly to discuss the significance of the mother figure in the text. At the beginning of *My Mother: Demonology*, an unidentified narrative voice claims Laure as "My mother," who when "she met my father. [...] kept abandoning and returning to love" (3).[9] Following the above assertion, Laure (as "my mother") "speaks" throughout the novel, moving through various discourses and voices, and experiencing everything from becoming a man named Heathcliff to entering a monastery where in a blunt political attack the sadistic head monk is a rapist father named Bush, a leader "selected through democratic processes," who announces at his party that he "could murder whomever he wanted" (162, 164). One thing, however, that Laure notably does not experience despite her designation specifically as a mother is becoming one in fact. She is, then, a mother in a figurative sense only in that it is to Laure Peignot's avant-garde mother-texts or mother tongue so-to-speak that Acker predominantly returns in *Demonology*. Significantly, one of *Demonology*'s central themes is language itself. And in fact, the phrase "My Mother spoke:" is a line emphasized and repeated in the fiction even though Laure paradoxically is "outside the [...] Law, which is language" (3, 116, 261, 253). She is, in other words, culturally destitute in that she "ha[s] no language" (206). The "new language" Laure consequently attempts to speak and to write paradoxically is "fed up with language and attempts to escape through it" (224, 80). It marks, then, a *refoundation* of language and entails consequently various symbolic returns to childhood, to a time before or, as Laure says, "without language" in which the body has not yet been eclipsed (21).

Juliet Flower MacCannell writes that, "Speech is where, after Lacan, both the contents and discontents in culture are structured; but this crucial domain, the power of speech [...] has never really been conceded to the Mother and is unlikely ever to be" (*The Hysteric's* 154). Certainly, theorists like Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray support MacCannell's argument that the mother or the feminine has always been excluded in some way from the symbolic order of language. In fact, as Margaret Whitford claims, one of Irigaray's central positions is that "what is needed is a change in the symbolic. [...] a place for a maternal genealogy must be made in the symbolic order" (88-92). In light of the above feminist remarks, one of Acker's triumphs in *Demonology*, I believe, is that she manages to "concede" language to the mother, at least in a figurative way. She manages to construct a "maternal genealogy" or a new, vibrant myth of the mother. She invokes, moreover, the notion of a transgressive freeing of language along more libidinally charged lines, and suggests a corresponding somatic subjectivity, not established on the repression of the maternal, but rather, through Laure Peignot or "My mother," on the restoration of the maternal as overshadowed source of avant-garde literary radicalism. Put another way, in claiming the voice within the fiction as "My mother," Acker opens a novelistic space for what might be viewed as *écriture féminine* or the semiotic "languages of the body" normally effaced by patriarchal culture, but accorded a central place through Acker's literary experimentalism. In more simplified terms, the claiming of Laure as mother also points to how Acker acknowledges past dissident women writers as foremothers of her own brand of textual, sexual, and social revolt, and seeks in her own work to construct a feminine linguistic genealogy. Along this line of thought, the term *demonology* of the novel's title refers possibly to a kind of psycho-linguistic possession by others,[10] a possession that shatters the "I" (that allows the "I," as Laure says, to "become traces of dust" or that results, as she later says, in a "monstrous cacophony" [46, 249]), but that simultaneously maximizes heterological relations, or mobilizes (at least on a textual level) marginalized (feminine) literary elements.

Acker's complex rehabilitation of the figure of the mother in *Demonology* is not seen elsewhere in her *oeuvre*. In *In Memoriam to Identity*, for instance, mothers often are drugged-up in their bedrooms on prescription medication, and also powerless, uncaring, and seemingly unwilling to defend their children from patriarchal violation, from the freaks and vicious power users that populate the fiction. Rimbaud's mother in fact, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is one of those very power users, bringing up her "kid by torturing him" (4). And Capitol's mother is incapacitated by her addiction to dex and librium; Capitol describes her as "a child, then a crip," then as a disappeared body, and then even more grimly as a dead one (169). In one of the most melancholic moments of the text, Capitol identifies with her mother's insufficiency or *déréliction*, admitting the difficulty of transforming established gender relations as well as the perilous path to a liberatory feminine erotics, saying, "Me. I am my mother. [...] I've learned to be in pain. I am my mother and I fuck whenever a man will have me" (175). Whereas in *In Memoriam to Identity* mothers play virtually no role in the transgressions enacted in the novel and there is little nostalgia associated with her figure, in *My Mother: Demonology*, on the other hand, Acker, I believe, rethinks the problem of the mother along much more subversive lines. Although most of the actual mother figures in *Demonology*—from Laure's own mother to Mrs. Bush, who responds incredulously to her daughter's alarming story about being raped by dad, collaborate with or reproduce the dominant religious or sociopolitical order (they act as sources of social indoctrination and repression), Laure as "My Mother" provides a new model in opposition to the conformist and reproductive version of the maternal. In *Demonology*, Laure Peignot represents in a way the promise of literary (maternal) refuge. Her voice as "My Mother" implies the textual reconnection to the mother's body, and reveals moreover how the figure of the mother has the potential for becoming outlaw in a social, sexual, and textual sense. By writing through Laure's life and "mother-texts" (most predominantly through her "Story of A Little Girl"), Acker in a symbolic way attempts, then, to re-envision and affirm the notion of the maternal (and of women's writing) in terms of desire and subversion, and no longer in terms of a base for the reproduction of the dominant order.

Part 2: From Traumatic Repetition to Healing—The Girl as Figure of Hope for the Future

Although I have been foregrounding the figure of the mother in *Demonology*, Acker aims in her fiction it seems less at the mother and more in fact at the girl or young woman in whom she sees the greatest potential for heterogeneity and treason. "I've always had a thing for wild girls. […] I was dreaming about sexuality […]. I am dreaming about young girls. […] I worshipped the girls who were bad. […] *Bad* means […] dripping with sexual juices," she writes in *Demonology*'s various sections (42, 50, 182). Laure in *Demonology* may be associated with the maternal, but she in fact speaks as a girl, a daughter, and a young woman. In so far as Acker aims at both a liberated and embodied female subject, she in fact finds her greatest potential in the girl in whom the installation of the law ultimately fails, and for whom patriarchal authority (in its various guises of the father, the president, or the priest) no longer holds much moral sway. For

Acker, it is the girl who is the greatest recipient of social violence, but who nonetheless refuses to see the world strictly as a place of horror.

In *My Mother: Demonology*, one of Acker's central aims is to narrate numerous scenes of crisis staged as allegorical encounters of the girl with sadistic father figures. From page 88 to 116 there is Beatrice's story of her father's artistic obsession with horror—an obsession that he pushes to the limits by attempting to witness and portray his own daughter burning up in flames. From page 117 to 158 there is Cathy and Heathcliff's story of their oppression by another father, Hideous Hindley whose "family is foul, garbage lies in its streets" (122). And in Chapter 5, there is also B's story about incest, about rape by a father, who turns out to be not only the Head Monk of a Monastery, but George Bush senior himself, who in his Gulf War endeavor gave Americans, as Acker puts it, "*a whole race to detest, a nation on which to spit, a religion to damn, everything you've ever wanted*" (16-17). The above textual sections are all centrally located in *Demonology*'s first part, provocatively entitled "Into That Belly of Hell Whose Name Is the United States." They are all stories filtered through Laure's voice and they each relate an unseemly meeting of the girl with the underbelly of patriarchy, and function in the text radically to de-idealize authority in the form of the artist, the family, the church, and the American state itself. These kinds of allegorical experimentations in the fiction show how horror is very much located within Western boundaries—within the father, the family, and perhaps most vilely also within the American presidency. In his attempt to paint torture by viewing his daughter's death by burning, Beatrice's father draws attention to the American dark side admitting that, "like most Americans, [...he] keep[s] pretending that horror is taking place outside American shores" (103), when he knows that it lies clearly within the boundaries of the nation, within the city, within his own self. That such horror can thrive within figures and institutions of supposed civilization or enlightenment ultimately points in Acker's text to the hypocrisy and failure of such institutions and social structures.

In *Demonology,* however, Acker goes beyond merely exposing the sadistic social scene. Her project is also to trace its effect on the figure of the girl. For example, in the ninth section of chapter five, B relates to her mother the self-destroying experience of **"RAPE BY DAD."** Acker writes and I quote at length:

> '[Bush] was telling me that [...] this was the last time that he would ever have to see my face.
>
> 'I said, 'Okay,' and walked away.
>
> 'I was trembling so hard though, I don't know why I could only walk about ten feet then had to sit down. Closed my eyes. After a few minutes or . . . I don't know how long . . . a hand grabbed one of mine and his body all around me I kept rubbing into him all I wanted was safety. I couldn't care where safety came from touching any human body is the only safety. Somehow the two of us, as if we were only one, kept proceeding up that hallway. Like Western Civilization.
>
> 'Then we had stopped and in that hole of stopping he kept saying 'I love you I'm sorry I love you I'm sorry.' Since I didn't understand what was happening why anything that was happening was happening I must have stopped being conscious I don't know how my clothes came off then I started being conscious: I realized that I didn't want to know that this was happening and I began searching for where to secrete my consciousness. [...]

> ‘He had just taught me that I can no longer appear and be a person when he’s around, that I can’t oppose him. I learned that I lost and am lost. Orphan. While father was raping me, I learned that I had to do away with my self.
>
> ‘Where could I hide this self? I searched. Decided to hide in the mirror: in memories of my past victimizations, especially sexual abuses and rapes. As Father was making love to me, whenever my consciousness was bad and wandered into the present, I repeated the sacred laws I had just given myself: the laws of silence and of the loss of language. For us, there is no language in this male world.
>
> ‘This is called *the poisoning of the blood.* (167-68)

Given the above passage’s unsettling depiction of incest, B’s measured, flat tone of voice seems troublingly incongruous. However, B’s monotonousness I think effectively conveys a shocked, benumbed subjectivity. Her apparent lack of affect in fact is consistent with psycho-social theories of trauma (like the one Barbara Whitmer proposes) that see the victim as experiencing a compensatory psychic numbing, social (and linguistic withdrawal), as well as a psychic turn from living to dying. In trying not to “know” or to speak or to participate “in this male world,” and in trying destructively “to do away with [...her] self,” B clearly exhibits classic symptoms of traumatization.

Apart from the scene’s violence and B’s strangely deadened tonality, another possibly troubling aspect of B’s story is her limited character development, her seeming lack of individuality. Acker’s sparse rendering of B’s portrait is, however, I think intentional in that by not fully individualizing B, Acker allows her protagonist to figure a larger, more systemic social problematic. In other words, B’s experience is meant to reflect possibly the female experience in general in an abusive culture. That B's encounter symbolizes a larger sociopolitical history of female abuse and repression is evident in B's provocative comment that in walking with Bush toward her doom (toward the incestuous liaison) the two of them "kept proceeding up that hallway. Like Western Civilization." With this remark, Acker suggests that gendered sadomasochistic violence (like that B experiences) is predetermined, or forming part of a deeply entrenched Western cultural norm. Furthermore indicating the existence of a more extensive wounded body, so to speak, is B's use of the plural personal pronoun "us" (where we might expect her to say "me") in the line, "For us, there is no language in this male world." By using the term "us" B gestures I think toward the other hurt bodies or wounded psyches populating *Demonology*, and hence her words paradoxically attest to a wounded (alternate) community as she simultaneously expresses her social (and linguistic) dissociation from the dominant, political order. Noteworthy also is B's italicized description of her incestuous experience as "*the poisoning of the blood*." This description is a linguistic-symbolic reminder of sorts that functions to extend extra-textually the notion of a wounded community of beings to include other beings from other former texts like *In Memoriam*, in which exploited figures like Airplane, as we saw, become diseased "*down there in blood*" (*In Mem* 133).

Although the subject matter of B's story of "**RAPE BY DAD**" is obviously disconcerting, the inclusion of such narratives in *Demonology* has positive effects and political value in fact beyond suggesting the existence of a wounded community. In other words, while B occupies the role of traumatized or sacrificial victim, the sacrificial dimensions of this story function in other more unexpected ways, and in fact incest (and other familial abuses in *Demonology*) has, I will explain, a paradoxically transformative political function in the text. By bringing the reality of incest to light, Acker unequivocally reveals patriarchy's dark underside—specifically, its betrayal of the girl. Such a revelation has the effect not only of dissociating the girl from the dominant familial and national order, but also of dissociating the reader, who sides, to borrow Cixous's terms, not with the powerful, but with those most "injured [...and] trespassed upon" ("Sorties" 71). My point, then, is that ultimately we might read the sacrifice enacted in "**RAPE BY DAD**" as not necessarily the sacrifice of the girl, but the sacrifice unexpectedly of the controlling order itself.

In his essay, "Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh," Bataille discusses various automutilators including Van Gogh, and makes some comments about sacrifice I find useful in reading the sacrificial dimensions of Acker's text. Bataille writes that at the heart of sacrifice is "the elementary fact of the radical *alteration* of the person." Sacrifice, Bataille argues, has "the power to liberate heterogeneous elements and to break the homogeneity of the individual"; its practice, he furthermore speculates, may be "charged with [...an] element of hate and disgust," not for the victim, but rather for "all those who have accepted the [...] official idea of life that is so well known" (70, 71). Where the generally accepted Durkheimian (or Girardian)[11] view of sacrifice is that it solidifies social bonds or reunifies the dominant social order, in Bataille's view, to quote Alexander Irwin from *Saints of the Impossible*, sacrifice or "sacrificial writing stages a rebellious psychological and social dismemberment. [...] a 'marvelous liberty'" (2, 9). In other words, for Bataille sacrifice marks "alterity and separation," and can provide an opportunity for revolt, a chance "to perform insubordination and refusal of collective norms." It marks an "amputation from the social whole" (Irwin 34-35). Bataillean sacrifice, Irwin further notes, signifies "incurable otherness even as it reaches toward a wounded communication" (35). Although Acker's protagonists are, unlike Van Gogh, not necessarily automutilators, they nonetheless exist in a sadistic "belly of hell" wherein as victims, as the "accursed share" of society, they become disillusioned and disconnected, sometimes even to the most nihilist and heterogeneous point of desiring escape through death: "'I don't want to live where Bush is leader,'" B declares at the close of *Demonology*'s first part, "'so you who are unknown, Death if need be, please hold me'" (175). In this way, Acker's novel, her sacrificial (and Bataillean) writing practice stages various denials, various "amputations from the [dominant] social whole," but in so doing it also puts into textual communication (or forges a collective memory between) variously wounded, damaged, or orphaned selves.

Importantly, however, not all of the sacrificial moments in *Demonology* end as bleakly as "**RAPE BY DAD**" with the girl's self-effacement and desire for death. For instance, when Beatrice's father along with the Mayor of New York attempt to watch Beatrice burn to death in a car for art's sake, although her ordeal is unspeakably alarming, the scene allows for some affirmation with Beatrice's escape and movement beyond victimage. As Beatrice tells her story, she is blindfolded, "bound by thick bandages to the insides of a car," and taken somewhere unknowing, she says, "if it was against my will." When the blindfold is removed, she sees both "light" and "desertion," and remarks strangely that, "Here was the beginning of the world." As a match falls "in an arc, through the beginning of the morning" and the flames in the car begin to rise, Beatrice is observed by her father, by the mayor, and by "men who looked like the homeless who warm their hands over the fires of garbage cans." The scene becomes increasing abusive and vile as Beatrice hears a voice say, "Rip a hole in her. Her mouth. The three of us in her at once. Rip. Rip. Rip." With surprising calm, she asks herself: "Has every victim chosen victimization?" And she answers implicitly in the affirmative revealing, "I had, also, put myself in the limo for my father [...]. I was scared. I cried and cried and cried and cried." Near the end of this bleak, incendiary scene a bag lady assumes Beatrice to be a criminal paying for her crimes and "hardened" by the "dirty words" of her artist father. Beatrice protests strangely that, "'Love doesn't work that way,'" and then she finally frees herself with the smoke from the fire obscuring her escape. "*Exit*," she enigmatically concludes her story, "means *rose*" (112-115).

Most startling about Beatrice's story is not only the tension between her seeming docility and the violence of the social scene, but also the juxtaposition between the scene's traumatic content and the heterologically interposed passages of muscular potentially and growth that read, for example, as follows:

> METHOD: A MUSCLE'S BUILT WHEN AND ONLY WHEN ITS EXISTING FORM IS SLOWLY AND RADICALLY DESTROYED. IT CAN BE BROKEN DOWN BY SLOWLY FORCING IT TO ACCOMPLISH MORE THAN IT'S ABLE. THEN, IF AND ONLY IF THE MUSCLE IS PROPERLY FED WITH NUTRIENTS AND SLEEP, IT'LL GROW BACK MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN BEFORE. (112)

With such avant-garde and unexpected heterological content, Acker, I think, points to the ways in which strength and heroism can be found in pain and bodily destruction. Avoiding idealization, she re-articulates, in other words, the fear and passivity of victimhood into an opportunity for power and growth. As readers, we experience Beatrice's ordeal in the Bataillean sense of sacrifice in that the horrors it conveys mark, on the one hand, our emphatic dissociation from the dominant patriarchal, political, and artistic powers that be, and mark, on the other hand, our simultaneous engagement with a space *par excellence* of wounded (but nonetheless heroic) marginality.

Although Beatrice's future is far from certain, we know that she does not die by fire, but rather accomplishes something of a "marvelous liberty," rising alive but unseen from the flames of this sacrificial moment. In fact, more than merely escaping the sadistic scene, Acker's symbolism and disruptive imagery of empowerment through pain ("A MUSCLE'S BUILT WHEN AND ONLY WHEN [...it is] RADICALLY DESTROYED") invite us to imagine Beatrice as passing through fire, through a destructive limit, to emerge, like the body builder's muscles, stronger and somehow "more beautiful than before." Also suggesting the oddly positive potentiality of the above scene is Beatrice's allusive and ethereal remark that, "*Exit* means *rose*." In the traditional symbolism of the phoenix, it dies by self-immolation and rises from its own ashes. The phoenix, furthermore, "represents gentleness since it crushes nothing it alights on and feeds on no living thing, only dew. The phoenix is associated with the rose in all Gardens of Paradise" (Cooper 129). Beatrice's questioning of her own masochistic complicity in becoming a victim, her escape and rising from fire, and the fact that for her "exit means rose" connect her I believe to the symbolism of the phoenix, and by extension possibly also to a vaguely glimpsed utopianism that we in fact see more clearly in *Demonology*'s second part. Granted, Beatrice's story is predominantly and unarguably dystopian; however, Beatrice's affirmations in the face of horror—her glimpse, for instance, of the "beginning of the world" as well as her generous ability to think about love in the midst of torture—are tonally and philosophically suggestive.

As we have seen, *Demonology*'s first part compulsively re-stages various politicized traumatic encounters mostly of the girl with sadistic, symbolic fathers personifying patriarchy's dark underside. Despite the despair and negativity of these scenes, they are not without liberatory reference or unexpected sacrificial effects, which function largely to exorcise any sense of traditional familial, civic, or national allegiance. Acker takes up and repetitively textualizes familial abuse and a violent, violating nationality in order, I believe, to expunge and ultimately to do away with these things ritualistically. Two ironies emerge then: first, with the supposed sacrifice of the girl comes the unexpected sacrifice of the dominant (homogenous order); and second, although Acker's repeated stories of abuse function to undo our allegiance to the dominant social order, they simultaneously have the effect of creating a new sociality of the wound, a new heterogeneous textual grouping of figures (including B, Beatrice, Cathy, and Heathcliff) allied by pain or by various signs of wounding.

Whereas *Demonology*'s first part aims to depict (and traumatically go "into") "that belly of hell whose name is the United States," the novel's second part aims (seemingly therapeutically) to move "Out (In the Form of Healing)" (177). In many ways, Part 2 of Acker's fiction is not altogether what we might expect given the emphasis on recovery in the section's title. Acker constructs no permanent emancipatory space, but offers rather only fleeting "privileged instants"[12] (fleeting moments of wonder and relationship) amidst narrative irrationality, amidst a wayward narrative itinerary that indulges persistently in the meaningless and unintelligible. Her ending certainly is not damaged in any way by an impossible, unsustainable, or programmatic utopianism. By writing or speaking beyond culturally sanctioned norms of family and nationality, Acker's heroine risks heterogeneous disidentity and incoherence, as her numerous comments abut how "communication's almost impossible," about how she will "not bear the lie of meaning," about how "the identity [...she] was taught is false," and about how she is "crumbling" all function dramatically to attest (259, 253, 201, 249). Although Laure tells us that she is "more stable than [...she has] been in a very long time," there is nonetheless a great deal of literary confusion that accompanies having a protagonist/ narrator who negates any kind of epistemological certainty with absurdist and paradoxical comments like, "I don't know where I am. I always haven't known and now I know that I know nothing" (247). In her "Speech for the *Artist in Society Conference*" held in Chicago in 1994, Acker commented that the authors of the historical French avant-garde (like Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Artaud) "posited themselves [...]. as anything but powerful," and "showed us that to be a poet is to be more than marginal, it is to be alienated from our society to the point of madness."[13] Acker's remarks are suggestive in relation to *Demonology* where Acker presents Laure, specifically in the second part, in much the same manner as she sees Artaud and other incipient writers: as "not interested," as Laure puts it, "in being master [...] of myself," as existing "outside the accepted," and as "living in the land of irrationality where all is free [...]. Pure wildness, [...]. Here, in this land that I don't know" (249, 253, 229). Laure, then, serves Acker in Part 2 as a model of revolt whereby the individual, going beyond cultural norms (essentially going beyond rationality) provides a radical counterpoint to the paralysis experienced by the girl under patriarchy. As readers, we experience the lack of subjection to norms (which occurs on textual, narrative, and sexual levels) as a "marvelous liberty," and also as a disordering and heteroglossaic form of literary delirium.

Part 2 reads in many ways, then, as a quest for liberty and escape that is often disorienting precisely in its very freedom from convention. However, despite the literary confusion, Acker offers clear steps in Part 2 toward transformation. One of the most politically provocative steps toward "healing" is the writing of Bush's death: "I know," says Bush, "that an artist is now penning *My* death [...] and I want to find out who she is," Acker writes with playful, but nonetheless politically charged self-referentiality (186). Later, although Acker's protagonist condemns Bush to the past, she nonetheless still feels uncertain about the future. Acker writes: "You are dead. Your kind is over with. The loss of memory that you taught [...] has turned back on you [...]. [Yet] Death itself isn't enough to obliterate: I know there was still only rubble, riot, that which now goes by the name *Society*. I don't know what to do about all that I see and experience. I can only ask *dream*" (215). Change may be difficult and uncertain, yet the quest for transformation clearly dominates the narrative trajectory. In Part 2, although Acker's protagonist remains disconnected from the established social order, in her very displacement she is free to imagine or to dream a new possibility beyond the patriarchal narrative of domination and abuse.

Clearly suggesting, then, the healing or recovery underway in *Demonology*'s second part is the fact that there are no more abusive encounters, no more sick fathers laying claim to the daughter's body and sexuality. The text's protagonist, who remains a clear compilation of Laure and Acker, remembers the traumatic past nonetheless, explaining it "at this moment of beginning" unambiguously as "a loss of freedom. Loss in the form of the actuality of rejection, abandonment, and individual authoritarianism. For me the past sits in the form, the actuality of the father," declares the novel's heroine (221). Brutalized in the patriarchal past, Laure now dreams or imagines that the "man who's claiming [a different] fathership of me [in the present] is Captain of the Pirates." And "This," Laure tells us, "is why I talk about the pirates. Freedom" (229). With a new pirate father signifying freedom, with this "moment of beginning" offered in Part 2, Laure is free to assume a radical somatic subjectivity and transgressive sexuality of her own. This freedom entails a transformation from self-imposed silence (something we saw most dramatically with B in Part 1) to writerly subjectivity: "Nothing," Laure exclaims, "will prevent me from writing words that sing" (180). These "words that sing" in essence "redo" the name of the father, and they also "redo" the past in the form of childhood by denouncing conventional socialization and education, and by allowing Laure to leave school—"the world of competition and envy," protocol and social climbing—for "the beautiful world that lies outside the school" (203, 207). As Laure describes it, this new world outside is significantly "amoral," a space "of constant wonder, journeying sights that amaze, in which I received and continue to receive my real education" (207). The "real education" Laure now experiences in Part 2 might be seen as a radical Deleuzean "schooling" of sorts in the mobilized flow of desire that has no certain end, direction, or object: "And so I left school," Laure says. "All that I wanted was to fuck and be fucked. I was just beginning to live the life that I desired. We traveled, like children, from hotel to hotel. Lived together in these rooms. [...] Floor after floor. [...] intricately connected labyrinths [...]. Children, we were traveling" (209). Part political and sexual exile and part postmodern nomad, Laure manages in strangely tender and idyllic passages like the one above to enunciate not only a proliferating sort of desire and a corresponding new ideal of plentitude, but also to use travel, movement, and the figure of the child as counterpoints to the repressions and stasis of conventional subjecthood. Also noteworthy about the above passage (and others as well, for instance, the one in which Laure and a Russian character named Timofy, their "inner mouth linings and tongues connected," experience "desire [...] in the form of a flame" and "no longer wanted to leave" one another [246]) is how its gentleness contrasts sharply with the earlier scenes from Part 1 of abuse and abandonment. In Part 2, then, against the sadism we witnessed in Part 1, Acker shows us the possibility for an alternative sexual economy that is both promiscuous and simultaneously generously loving.

Following Laure's departure from school, the spaces articulated in the novel might be described as dynamic, indefinite, and marginal. Events blend into recounted events as Laure travels by boat, plane, car, and motorcycle to both real and symbolic places (for instance, to the river Lethe, to "*the street of that which is forbidden*," to Berlin, to "*the city of memories*," to "the Chapel Perilous," to Russia, to Innsbruck, to Hôtel Étoile Rouge, to Hôtes des Yeux Lilas [212, 226, 239]), defying in the process any final realization or arrival, and perpetually pushing forward in a drive to experience the world afresh. In a sense, Laure's inconclusive nomadism (her wayward wanderings and the attendant mobile, labyrinthine arrangements of the text) is utopic in the fullest sense of utopia literally meaning *no place* or *without place*. Put another way, Laure embodies or personifies the abstract qualities and position of the exile or outsider, who adopts an open perspective, never settles anywhere, and who allows herself to be endlessly displaced, thereby forfeiting any position of mastery. At the end of the fiction, Timofy points to Laure's status as exiled other telling her, "'you don't have a home; in this world, you're always going to be strange'" (245). In the world of *Demonology*, in which Laure has managed to turn exile or homelessness into a creative opportunity for a dynamic, unprohibited becoming, Timofy's proclamation in many ways marks not a problematic, but a new possibility.

Part 3: Founding a Community in Negativity—*Demonology* as *Memento Mori*

Although I have emphasized the positive, even utopian dimensions of *Demonology*'s second part in which Acker's heroine becomes free and vagabond, the novel's ending is, admittedly, by no means altogether uplifting. Acker delivers no comfortable conclusion, and, in fact, *Demonology*'s last pages, written mostly in an epistolary mode and based quite closely upon Laure's actual letters to Bataille as they appear in *Laure: The Collected Writings*, strike a powerfully despondent final note as Laure eventually comes "face to face with death" (267). In the novel's last few pages, Laure writes depressingly of "suffering" (249), of being "insufficient" (248), of waking "into terror" (251), of "disintegrating" (253), of "[b]eing without anybody, in the deepest part" (247), of being "completely alone" (265), of "breaking" (265), of finding "nothing" in her "search in [...her] self" (267), of being "everything that makes another person turn away in horror" (265), of being "strangled to death by solitude" (251), and most sadly of all perhaps, of having her impossible desire for Bataille ("I need to see your flesh just once," she writes, "I need to see your face" [250, 252]) met only with laughter. All "I know now," Laure says, is "want. [...] Day by day, my life is becoming a little more

> empty breaking apart like a corpse decomposing herself under my own eyes. [...] My teeth grind; I vomit. I know well that I'm not going to see you again. You and all the others. It's time to quit this play" (250, 259, 264-65).

The anguished, distressed tone of the quotations above seems radically to undercut the utopic transformations envisioned earlier. The text's discomforting ending (with the emphasis on loneliness, dying, and death) is from one perspective puzzlingly pessimistic given the prior sense of wonder and hope (and the earlier emphasis on "redoing" childhood). While Laure has been striving in Part 2 toward a new feminine subjectivity and sexuality beyond that imagined or prescribed by the fathers of the past, Laure's descent into despair in many ways bespeaks the repetition of old and familiar patterns. Certainly, despite *Demonology*'s experimental form and its articulation of a nomadic feminine erotics, the ending may seem discouraging with its seemingly traditional textualization of death for the female protagonist. As discussed in previous chapters, feminists like Cixous and Irigaray lament the association of women and death in the cultural imaginary—they lament how "a masculine culture" has made women sacrificial objects, and made death, as Irigaray says, women's "only [symbolic] horizon" ("Love Between" 171). Acker, I have suggested, offers a similar critique in *Demonology* through disturbing stories like Beatrice's ordeal by fire in which her father perversely wants to witness (and symbolize through art) his own daughter's death by burning. Acker's unsavory portrayal of Bush (who associates his own daughter and all women in fact with the "physical world that is always changing, menstruating, turning to shit," and in whose "male language, death and women are friends" [173, 195]) also reveals the cultural links between women, physicality, abjection, and death. The question in my mind, then, is what are we to make of *Demonology*'s ending, which in fact brings the reader closer to death than any other part of the narrative, strengthening the link between the female protagonist and the abjection of death, between the feminine and the "corpse decomposing"?

In answering this question it is important to stress that while Acker has always unmasked and denounced the victimization, raping, and murdering of girls, young women, and other marginalized figures, her project has never been a redemptive one—it has never been to save her heroines from abjection or restore them to the homogeneous order. In other words, *Demonology* (and in fact Acker's other texts like *In Memoriam* and *Pussy, King of the Pirates*) traces its narrative path between two impulses: between trying to write the violence of the familial or national tragedy and attempting to get beyond this victimization, *not* by having her protagonists rejoin the dominant order and *not* certainly by eclipsing the body (its vulnerabilities and woundings), but rather by facing pain and transforming it into an opportunity for solidarity and strength. As we saw, for instance, in *In Memoriam*, wounds can become "signs of [...] love," masochistic eroticism can be an opportunity "to cut through [...] autism" (through the confines of private selfhood), and various wounded selves (Rimbaud, Airplane, Capitol) can unite (at least on linguistic and textual levels) to establish a collective subjectivity in marginality, a sociality of the wound. Likewise, in *Demonology* a torturous experience like Beatrice's ordeal by fire is not merely a testimonial of victimhood worthy of commiseration, but also a pointed articulation of growth, bravery, and muscular potentiality. My point is not that Acker necessarily glorifies victimhood or death for the female protagonist; rather, throughout her narrative production she both embraces and attempts to mobilize the symbolic and political force of various marginalized states. When we come "face to face with [Laure's] death" at *Demonology*'s close, although, granted, an anguished narrative tone emerges in which Laure laments her limited place in an avant-garde sociality, there is another more affirmative way to read the ending in which Laure, precisely in representing her own death, articulates her shared humanity, and, in a moment of intimacy, shows that we are all part of a community in negativity.

Again, I turn to Bataille, whose ideas about the relationship of literature, anguish, sacrifice, and death are useful in discussing the difficult ending of Acker's novel. Earlier in this chapter I mentioned Bataille's view of sacrifice as marking a negation—an "amputation" from the homogeneous realm or, as Bataille puts it in *Theory of Religion*, as dissolving "the real [or banal] order" of utility, money-making, accumulation, and self-preservation. For Bataille, although sacrifice disturbs "the calm regularity of the profane world" (it displaces the dominant homogeneous social order or whole), its ritualized structure in which a body is torn apart exposes the fragile reality of embodiment, and significantly delineates a space of "communication" wherein we see ourselves in the other's wounds (Bataille, *The History* 94). In his work on Bataillean sacrifice, Christopher M. Germerchak stresses that the notion of "communication" is of utmost importance to Bataille. Germerchak asserts: "Communication is for Bataille one of the essential ways to assert the structure of Being [...]. If one is to communicate, to reveal the intimacy among beings [...], one must leave oneself naked, open to laceration, to the risk of death" (157, 159). As Bataille provocatively writes in his 1936 address to "The College of Sociology": "human beings are only united with each other through rents or wounds [...] through [...] a rip in [...personal] integrity [...] which goes to benefit the communal being. Initiations, sacrifices, and festivals represent so many moments of loss and communication between individuals" (251). Sacrifice severs us, then, from the dominant and profane social order, but paradoxically it simultaneously founds a community. Put simply, with the wounding of a body in sacrifice, we see ourselves as so many continuous bodies that die. Another significant comment Bataille makes about sacrifice in *The History of Eroticism* is that literature is "the principle heir" to sacrifice. Bataille writes: "it [literature] has received sacrifice as a legacy," and "this longing to lose, to lose ourselves and to look death in the face, found in the ritual of sacrifice [is] a satisfaction [...we] still get from the reading of novels" (106).

Literature's "sacrificial imperative,"[14] if it can be so imagined à la Bataille, reveals itself in *Demonology* most powerfully (but not exclusively) in the text's final lines when Laure is "face to face with death," telling us that now she "want[s] to communicate—it's time," she says. Laure then proceeds, as she puts it, "to scream like a wounded animal." She begins to speak of the necessity of "cut[ting] life into bits, for neither the butcher store nor the bed of a woman who's giving birth is more bloody than this." She speaks as well of "cuts into 'veracity.'" And directly before handwriting her own name—"Laure"—in bold print, she writes possibly one of the most provocative lines in the book: "the cries of children who aren't playing, the cries of humans and of the earth itself turning—THE VERTIGO—all these are found in the cuts—not just the decadence and rot—but the entire human being is found there. No one can be more human than this" (267). As Laure's signature amidst her "bestial howling" (*Dem* 267) perhaps attests, this is writing that "engages being in its destruction" (Bataille, *The History* 110). At the text's close, Laure searches for or probes the wound as a means toward sacrificial communication, as a means of exposing us all as mutually "cut" or as mutually identified and heroic in death: "No one can be more human than this." Although just a few pages earlier Laure ironically disparages Bataille for, among other things, his narcissism (for "want[ing] only in a mirror" [260]), the quotations above about how "the entire human being" is "found in the cuts" are nonetheless surely written within a Bataillean tradition of sacrificial writing in which, as Bataille puts it, "it is most engaging when the character of the hero leads him, of his own accord, to his destruction," and in which we are carried "toward the point of resolution [...] in the anguish of figurative death or downfall, that singularly excessive joy that engages being in its destruction" (*The History* 107, 110).[15]

Conclusion

My Mother: Demonology's two-part structure or narrative trajectory ultimately moves us "out" of a sadistic "belly of hell" away from traumatic scenes of patriarchal abuse, and toward strangely utopic moments of mobile displacement and wonder. However, on a possibly more troubling note, in Part 2 the narrative moves from various scenes of renewed childhood wonder and marvel to the "bestial howling" accompanying Laure's confrontation with death. Although Acker's fiction radically challenges patriarchal authority—be it political, artistic, or religious—that has repressed the body (primarily the female body) as an object of horror, *Demonology* is clearly not damaged by what I call redemptive narrative, but rather insists (in keeping with Bataille's notion of literature's "sacrificial imperative") that we are all connected by death, by the fact that we are all bodies that die: "nothing can be more human than this." At the fiction's end, by having Laure finally (and importantly of her "own accord") "look death straight in the face" (Bataille says that this "is the most we can do" [*AS* v.2, 107, 109]), Acker treads sensitive territory, managing to elude victimization for the female protagonist, but simultaneously refusing to limit the reality of the "cut," so to speak. A pessimistic reading of the ending might see Laure as failing in her quest to re-envision the world or to write "words that sing." However, such a reading would occlude the fact that in writing her own loss in death, Laure paradoxically founds not only a "literature of the body," but also (as Bataille might argue) a new community in negativity. *My Mother: Demonology* is, I think, clearly one of Acker's most challenging novels. The innumerable narrative displacements (the "cuts" or rents in the text), the movements toward and away from death and then "face to face with" it, the heterological conflation of Acker's and Laure's voices (and other voices as well), and the biographically embellished portrayal of Laure as a girl and also as "my mother," are all disarming facets of the fiction. However, through its indictment of the dominant patriarchal order and through its insistence on the textual inclusion of the bodily (and maternal) realm, *My Mother: Demonology* distinctly affirms the repressed and heterological as new possibilities for community.

Notes

1. Along with Bataille, Herman mentions Boris Souvarine (one of Laure's lovers and an editor of the leftist journal *La Critique Sociale*), Simone Weil (a radical thinker and revolutionary), and Michel Leiris (a surrealist, Marxist contributor to *La Critique Sociale*) as forming part of the dissident, intellectual French circle that influenced and included Laure. In *Demonology*, Acker has Laure speak of meeting other artists and intellectuals (Romare Bearden, Maya Deren, and Paul Rendier), who show her "that it was possible to live in a community other than my parents', a community that wasn't hateful." This intellectual, bohemian community, says Laure, opened "up the world of possibilities, saved me from despair" (14).

2. For instance, Welch Everman in his on-line review of *Demonology* mentions Bataille, Dario Argento, and others (but not Laure) as inspiring Acker's production of *Demonology*. R. U. Sirius in his on-line interview with Acker more singularly mentions Bataille as directing *Demonology*'s themes and preoccupations. And Elizabeth Hirsh during her talk delivered at the MLA conference in San Francisco in 1998 stressed the importance of both Bataille's and Breton's surrealist thought upon Acker's work. However, in an interview with Laurence A. Rickels, Acker herself claims that the writing of *Demonology* "started out as [...her] fascination with Laure's work and with Bataille." "I was amazed," she says, "that the same preoccupations I have are there too" in Laure texts ("Laurence A. Rickels" 61).

3. See Breton's "Max Ernst" in *Beyond Painting*, page 177.

4. Acker's *My Mother: Demonology* and Breton's *Mad Love* are very different works, but clear thematic links nonetheless exist between their productions. For instance, Acker's celebration of movement and travel (which I discuss later in Part 2 of this chapter) as figures of love is akin to Breton's "eagerness" in *Mad Love* "to wander in search of everything" (25). His view that the "greatest weakness in contemporary thought [...] resides[s] in the extravagant reverence for what we know compared with what we do not yet know" (*ML* 40) is also tied, I believe, to Acker's neo-avant-gardist scorn for bourgeois reason and rationality. Breton's "desire for that which has not yet been possible—to go together down the path lost with the loss of childhood, winding along" (*ML* 49) further resonates with Acker's labyrinthine, textual attempt to "redo childhood," and thereby access a new, idyllic space. That Acker wrote *Demonology* also with Breton's *Nadja* in mind is made clear by her inclusion on page 211 of her text of Breton's famous, ending declaration in *Nadja*: "Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all" (*Nadja* 260).

5. In *Demonology*, Bataille is not a character in any conventional sense; rather, he functions largely as an epistolary address for Laure, as well as a kind of absent presence whose ideas on heterology, sacrifice, death, and the sacred seem somehow to haunt the fiction. Although Bataille is not a proper character in the text, he does, however, speak late in the narrative about Laure's death, telling us that he "want[s] to live with [...her] ghost" the way "Heathcliff lived with Cathy's" (260).

6. Acker's publications with both Pantheon Books and Grove Press list 1948 as Acker's birth year. However, Brian Bouldrey in *The Salon. Com Reader's Guide to Contemporary Authors* gives her year of birth as 1947, while Robert Lort in his on-line "In Memoriam to Kathy Acker" suggests that she was born much earlier in 1944.

7. I am quoting Alexander Irwin from *Saints of the Impossible* where he discusses Bataille's notion of sacrifice, and writes that for Bataille, "sacrifice as self-inflicted violence marks [...] incurable otherness even as it reaches toward a wounded communication" (35). As Irwin suggests, Bataille sees sacrifice as symbolizing dissociation from the dominant order, but simultaneously also as establishing new relations founded upon suffering. In Part 2 of this chapter (and with reference to both Irwin and Bataille) I discuss further how we might in fact view *Demonology* as grounded in sacrificial practice.

8. In "ABAB: Acker, Bataille, Argento, Brontë," Welch Everman also cites Bataille's novel *My Mother*, "Paul Celan's poetry, Georg Buchner's theatre, [...and] Herschell Gordon Lewis' 1963 film *Blood Feast*" as variously "appropriated textual elements" in *Demonology*. See his web-site http:acker.thehub.com.au/ackademy/everman.html.

9. While the voice who claims Laure as "my mother" is not properly or clearly identified, I nonetheless read that voice as belonging to Acker herself, who, in claiming Laure and Bataille as parents, audaciously reconstructs the family in *Demonology* along radically insurgent lines.

10. In "From Work to Text" in *Image – Music – Text*, Roland Barthes makes a distinction between different forms of literature that he calls either works or texts. He argues that where the work is contained within a single genre, the plurality of the "Text poses problems of classification [...] because it always involves a certain experience of limits" (157). Barthes furthermore asserts that the "reader of the Text may be compared to someone at a loose end" (159). However, most relevant perhaps for reading Acker's *Demonology* as text (in Barthes's sense of the term) is Barthes's claim that whereas "the work has nothing disturbing for any monistic philosophy," the text, conversely, "could well take as its motto the words of the man possessed by demons (*Mark* 5: 9): 'My name is Legion: for we are many'" (160). Acker's demoniacal or demonological writing practice (in which various selves or voices are embedded with one another) distinctly makes *Demonology* a text as Barthes defines it.

11. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim argues that sacrificial acts reunify a troubled social order. Durkheim writes: "When a society is going through circumstances which sadden, perplex or irritate it, [...]. It imposes upon [...its members] the duty of weeping, groaning or inflicting wounds upon themselves or others, for these collective manifestations, and the moral communion which they show and strengthen, restore to the group the energy which circumstances threaten to take away from it, and thus they enable it to become settled" (459). More

pointedly, René Girard declares that the "purpose of [...] sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric" (*Violence and the Sacred* 8).

12. In his essay "The Sacred," Bataille uses the phrase "privileged instant" to describe an extraordinary experience beyond the homogenous (241). In his essay, he explains the sacred as "a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of the convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled" (242). Leaving aside the fact that Bataille's notion of "privileged instants" likely shares much in common with Breton's notion of "compulsive beauty," Acker's *Demonology*, I suggest, aspires toward the sacred (in the Bataillean sense) in that its heroine leaves behind the known and stultifying world of formal education ("competition and [...] envy" [203]) for a dynamic freedom that she associates with rare moments of wonder.

13. Acker's speech can be found at the following web site: http://acker.thehub.com.au/ackademy/speech.htm.

14. I borrow the phrase "sacrificial imperative" from Christopher M. Germerchak, who speaks in his book *The Sunday of the Negative* about Bataille's theory that literature has a distinct sacrificial function (158). Germerchak states that in Bataille's view, "Writing, like sacrifice, is the way to found a community among beings, to end their isolation in this profane world of personal concerns [...]. Writing [...] is the kindred spirit of eroticism, and of sacrifice" (158-159).

15. The death we experience in *Demonology* is more than "figurative" (and consequently, I think, more provocative) in that Acker's text is of course a fictionalized account of Laure's *actual* life and death.

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CHAPTER FIVE:

Acker's Radical Performance Writing in *Eurydice in the Underworld* and Other Texts[1]

Introduction

[...] the dead [...].
They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it, [...].
All goes onward and outward [...],
And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.
Walt Whitman, "Section 6," lines 121-30 from *Song of Myself*

Death [...] is not to sleep, but to rise,
Not to sleep, but to return.
Marina Tsvetaeva, lines 27-28 from Section 3 of "Sibyl" in *After Russia*

Every time that you read, you are walking among the dead, and, if you are listening, you just might hear prophecies.
Kathy Acker, "On Delany the Magician" 63

Where *My Mother: Demonology* takes us to the brink of death, Acker's *Eurydice in the Underworld* in fact takes us further. *Eurydice* is a mythopoeic, dramatic, and postmodernist retelling of the classical story of Eurydice and Orpheus, and also one of the most autobiographically resonant texts Acker produced before she died in 1997 from complications related to breast cancer. This chapter discusses the structure and form of Acker's late work, contending that *Eurydice in the Underworld* is a provocative example of radical performance writing, in which Acker continues in a new way to write the body in pleasure and in pain, and to fantasize furthermore her own body's ending, so-to-speak, mourning and imagining a richer vocabulary for her own loss and death. While Acker's previous literary productions insistently reiterate the figure of the outlaw heroine who is socially disenfranchised, sexually aberrant, or otherwise alienated from the father's law, the uncanny achievement of *Eurydice in the Underworld* is that (following in the wake of *Demonology*'s last few pages) it opens textual spaces for the dying and the dead, for those bodies perhaps most radically repudiated, set-apart, and quarantined from the dominant cultural imaginary.

In her essay "On Delany the Magician," from which I quote in the third epigraph above, Acker states that Samuel Delany's narrative *Trouble on Triton* takes us to "all that is other, to the other-world or underworld" (63). Acker's statement about Delany reveals coincidentally the primary aim of Acker's own literary project, which is to draw into the symbolic order of language what has been most muted, most elided, and most repressed by culture. *Eurydice in the Underworld* can be seen as a bold extension of Acker's attempt to write and inhabit difference, or to articulate the real. In *Eurydice*, Acker gives symbolic expression to what are possibly the most unknown and secret areas of human experience; she manages, put simply, to extend the possibilities of dramatic representation and to create an innovative performance in which our relationship to death can be more fully articulated. The format of this chapter is in two parts: the first briefly considers the recent performance theories of Amelia Jones (*Body Art/Performing the Subject*), Timothy Murray (*Drama Trauma: Specters of race and sexuality in performance, video, and art*), and Peggy Phelan (*Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*) in relation generally to Acker's late texts, and implies coincidentally that there are shared sources of radicalism in different kinds of performance outside of conventional theatre. The second part of this chapter specifically explores how *Eurydice in the Underworld*, beginning largely as a traditional play, ultimately stretches the notion of dramatic genre itself by developing a kind of avant-garde performance writing, which offers a travelogue into future landscapes of desire and death.

Part 1: Performance Theory and Acker's Writing Practice

In "Death (and Life) of the Author," Peter Wollen has recently noted Acker's textual experimentations with performance, commenting generally that "writing as a performance form [...] stayed with her through every twist and turn of her career" (3). However, Wollen does not pursue this connection between Acker's writing practice and performance art much further except to say that Acker relied on "improvisation as a mode of literary composition" and that as a graduate student she was influenced by Eleanor Antin, a female performer and conceptual artist from San Diego (3). A number of important questions, then, remain largely unexplored and unanswered: first, in what ways are Acker's literary experimentations performative and, second, what exactly is being performed?

In the simplest sense, Acker has connected literature with performance by actually staging passages from some of her novels. Most recently and notably in 1996 she recited passages from her fiction *Pussy, King of the Pirates* on stage with the band the Mekons and recorded a CD with them as well. But aside from such literal stagings of novelistic prose, there are many ways in which Acker's texts in themselves can be linked to performance art, and especially to body art. In her book *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, Amelia Jones explores a number of contemporary visual and performing artists including, among others, Hannah Wilke and Vito Acconci. Jones discusses what she calls "postmodern performativity" as "marked by a mode of exaggeration: the artistic subject is not presented [...] as trustworthy document of identity but is self-consciously *performed* through new, openly intersubjective contexts [...,] which insist upon the openness of this and all subjects to the other" (67). Although Jones is referring to contemporary visual artistic practice, her comments about intersubjectivity and the postmodernist instability of identity are also relevant to Acker, whose intertextual literary practice can be viewed in some sense as a trope for the radical interrelatedness or intersubjectivity of the self and the other. In *In Memoriam to Identity*, for example, the presence of Rimbaud's poetry in the text and the blending of his voice with Capitol's and Airplane's different voices can be seen as performing, to quote Jones, "a dramatically revised paradigm of" subjectivity as a continuous process of production, transformation, and interconnection (15).

Another claim Jones makes about visual performance, specifically about body art, is that it "emphasizes the implication of the body ([...]with all of its apparent racial, sexual, gender, class, and other [...] identifications) in the work" (13). Body art, she specifies, "projects the body of the artist into the work" (14). Again, the above remarks could be made of Acker, who insistently attempts to write the pain, the illnesses, and the intense eroticism of the female body, and who furthermore often uses her own physical experience (as she does, for instance, in *Eurydice*) for the subject of her narratives. The question of how Acker writes the body, how she performs it or "projects" it into her work, is in fact a complex one which I would like to explore briefly with reference to the confluence of textuality and female sexuality in *Pussy, King of the Pirates*.

Acker explicitly draws attention to the most personal, private aspects of the female body by thematizing feminine desire and biological processes often through highly quotidian narrative like that occurring in the following brief passage from *Pussy*: "She was wearing a Kotex pad and the black cotton panties that she always had on whenever she had her period" (46). More interesting, however, is how Acker's linguistic experimentalism also performs, so-to-speak, a transgressive female eroticism. Acker's frequent use of techniques like the ludic, stream-of-consciousness repetition of the same word, phrase, or line in the text ("oh yes baby starting to come too excited shaking eyes fading [...] mouth is smiling going yes yes wants no open stay open" [*Pussy* 38]), the incorporation of obscenity and vulgarity ("My whole cunt is now this animal who's becoming hungrier" [*Pussy* 34]), the reorganization of normal word order ("At times, the stench, more pungent than sweat, under her own armpits" [*Pussy* 53]), and the corresponding flirtations with meaninglessness ("The final orgasm will occur when my brains are making mantra" [*Pussy* 34]), all, in some way, disrupt proper linguistic traditions and refuse the notion of language simply as referential or denotative vehicle. Earlier in my chapter on Acker's *In Memoriam*, I argue that through experimental aestheticism Acker manages to write what lies on the cultural periphery, to construct a poetics of the margins. Her project of textualizing the margins specifically involves giving voice to the eroticism—whether feminine, gay, lesbian, or sadomasochistic—that exists within that peripheral realm. In the brief but libidinally charged quotations above, all taken from *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, Acker can similarly be said to perform through innovative language (and not just through subject matter alone) a radically visceral form of feminine subjectivity. Acker manages, in other words, to unleash the erotics of language, to make the body talk. Acker's transgressive writing practice—her performance writing—is, moreover, decidedly politically inspired: for Acker, in other words, feminist transformation or change must necessarily occur on symbolic and linguistic levels. As Laure from *Demonology* so aptly puts it: "'No new world without a new language'" (224).

There are other ways in which Acker's texts can be linked to avant-garde performance traditions or be regarded as innovative performative literature. I turn briefly to the recent performance studies of Timothy Murray in *Drama Trauma: Specters of race and sexuality in performance, video, and art* and of Peggy Phelan in *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* to help illuminate further Acker's radical practice.

In *Mourning Sex*, Phelan theorizes what she calls "performative writing" as a form of textuality that expresses "the radicality of unknowing who we are becoming, [...and that] pushes against the ideology of knowledge as a progressive movement forever approaching a completed end-point" (17). "Performative writing," she continues, "is set against the normative ideology that insists that we die [only] once" (17). Also relevant is Phelan's more general view of performance as "phantasmatical," or "predicated on [...its] own disappearance" and capable of "summoning the incorporeal" (2). She discusses, moreover, a form of tragic theatre that she says, "carries the force of the real, which is to say, [...] rehearses death" (14). Speaking of "written enactments of the terror of theatre and its invisibilities," Murray likewise addresses performative literature's privileging not necessarily of *presence* but paradoxically its emphasis upon radical *absence* (21). Performance art, Murray contends more generally, moves "to release rather than repress the subliminal energies of the body, [...it moves] not merely to make present and visible but more essentially to activate [...] representational absence and Otherness" (235). What Phelan and Murray (and Acker in fact) share, then, is an emphasis on the relationship of performance not only to textuality, but also to loss, disappearance, and death.

In numerous ways, certainly, Acker's texts incorporate features of radical performance as defined by Phelan and Murray. Acker's heroines, for instance, often make statements in rejection of being and in favor of the radicality of unknowing who they are becoming. In a passage from *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, Pussy speaks of looking at many strangers, "At the man who had spooned liquid out of the pools. At the ebony-haired woman. At the half-human half-stilt. At the mongoloid midget. At all who were stranger or more monstrous." She says, "I kept looking and looking, but I could no longer find myself. I realized that I'd escaped my death because I no longer knew who I was" (85). These provocative lines thematize the self as a subject in uncertain process, whose existence is assured less by the presence of identity and more paradoxically by its absence, unfixity, or undecidability. In this way, Acker's writing performs the self as radically other.

Not only do Acker's texts perform self-absence (not only do they persistently dramatize the "I" becoming "traces of dust" [*Demonology* 46]), but their numerous masochistic representations might also be seen as rehearsing death, which, Phelan argues, is a mark of the performative. *Demonology*'s heroine Laure, for example, "always want[s]," as she remarks, "to test everything to the point of death" (24). Her transgressive desire leads her to masochistic sex in which, as she says to B, "the violence of my passion was amputating me for you" (27). These kinds of masochistic articulations in Acker's narratives contribute to a textual economy of self-loss or sacrifice and can be viewed as testaments to or derivatives of the death drive. Acker's heroines are connected to death and its rehearsals in other symbolic ways as well: as strippers, runaways, prostitutes, or wanderers they have been repudiated, confined, or otherwise repressed in the cultural imaginary, but they have nonetheless endured the deaths accorded them by the law of the social and gone on to dream the possibility of another social space. For example, in *Pussy* the prostitutes O and Ange, Acker writes, "have been dead [to the world] for so long," but they nevertheless survive their own sociopolitical deaths by embarking on an extended allegorical journey through the "bottom of the world" to glimpse finally a new world and ambiguous social order where "the reigns of all reigns could be over" (109, 163, 273). Acker's late novels like *Demonology* and *Pussy* have performative elements, then, in that they redefine the meaning of death, and figure as well powerfully revenant bodies or selves.

Part 2: *Eurydice in the Underworld* as Avant-garde Performance in which the Self is a "Being-with Specters" and Death is Present in Language

Opening as a conventional play and then rapidly extending performance beyond theatre and becoming in its second section an experimental production that would be difficult actually to stage, *Eurydice in the Underworld*, more than Acker's earlier works, is allied to radical performance writing. *Eurydice* portrays the intersubjective, multivalent self and as such shares something with the "postmodern performative" as postulated by Jones. Looking definitively toward death, *Eurydice*, I will furthermore show with brief reference to Murray and Phelan, eschews linearity and marks the body or self predominantly as trace. Moreover, it allows Acker to rehearse her own impending death and to make it the subject of new and innovative narratives. *Eurydice*, in other words, serves in many ways as *memento mori* wherein we watch a body die only to be reconfronted with its unbounded return or with the uncanny representation of its absence. This section of the essay considers not only what Acker accomplishes aesthetically and politically in *Eurydice*'s two separate parts, but it considers also how her transgression of dramatic convention, how her movement from tradition to experimentation, pushes epistemological limits and compels us to question the boundaries between life and death, self and other. In considering Acker's innovations with performance writing, I have found both Jacques Derrida's theory of spectrality (or hauntology) and Hal Foster's notion of the turn to the real in neo-avant-garde art useful.[2] I contextualize my reading of *Eurydice*, then, in relation to performance theory and to some extent in relation also to philosophical and art-critical discourses.

The first part of *Eurydice in the Underworld* relies upon certain theatrical conventions like setting, scene, private monologues, as well as considerable dialogue between the two central characters, Eurydice and Orpheus, or as they more playfully call one another, "You" and "Or." The play's opening section, only fourteen pages long and entitled "The Overworld," contains nine scenes: one set in a small "cell" in a doctor's office, four set in an apartment in Algiers with a well-used, red bed and a view that "overlooks the world," and four other scenes occurring in a hospital "devoid of warmth" and populated by "[m]oving figures in pale, that is, puke-green, who may or may not be human" (1, 11). The situation and the problem are clearly given: Eurydice and Orpheus are lovers, but their relationship is troubled by Eurydice's suffering from cancer and from the surgical removal of her breast tissue and eight lymph nodes, six of which the "Doc" says, "showed signs of cancer" (5).

Acker accomplishes various political tasks in the play's first section: first, she denounces the dehumanizing practices and the ineffectuality of conventional medicine. In the play's language, hospital rooms become places "designed to suck up human life" (13). And as a patient, Eurydice is treated as something less than human; brutalized through illness and the regimes of medicine, Eurydice becomes a non-subject, a strange "thing under a cap [that] sticks out its tongue" when asked to do so (13, 12). Acker additionally politicizes *Eurydice in the Underworld* by calling into question the mainstream cultural imperative that constructs the cancerous and mastectomized body as necessarily asexual and obscene. While Acker depicts the manner in which medical practitioners work to strip away Eurydice's individuality, to disidentify her by covering and taping up her tattoos and piercings so that her body can signify only disease, Acker also shows how the cancerous and fatally ill body remains sexualized, desiring, and desirable as well. For instance, after her mastectomy, Orpheus says to Eurydice that he has "never been turned on by anyone else the way [...he is] by you" (8). And Eurydice, despite her pain, wants to "Do it again now," to "keep on fucking," as she says, to evade death (9). An encounter between the two lovers unfolds as follows:

> OR: There's no way you're going to die. Climb on top of me.
>
> YOU (*doing as she's told to do*): You always want me on top of you. (*As soon as she's on top of him*) You'll have to hold my buttocks down if you want me to get any pleasure this way.
>
> OR (*sort of holding her buttocks down*): I'm going to come soon.

YOU: If we keep on fucking, I'm not going to die. (9)

Through the figure of Eurydice, Acker imagines the body as providing an uncertain refuge. Although she presents the body under the grip of medical treatment and death and in terms of its profound alienation, she also envisions it more erotically under the grip of desire and in significant connection to another.

In the closing scenes of the first part of *Eurydice in the Underworld*, Eurydice is taken deeper into the rooms of the hospital, through its "first" and "second" stations and then finally to the "third station," which Acker parenthetically entitles "death" (10-13). The narrative emphasis upon interiority and upon the traversal of certain boundaries suggests that this is explicitly a "limit-text," [3] blurring and transgressing the lines between life and death and moving us toward what is normally hidden from view. The third station, barred to Orpheus, is the bridge symbolically between the knowable and the unknowable; it is the last point at which we see Eurydice alive in the overworld. The next part of the work, beginning enigmatically (and intimately) with a "Diary written by Eurydice when she's dead" (15), allegorizes the return of the culturally repressed body. Given the theatrical aspects of *Eurydice in the Underworld*'s first section, the viewer (or reader) expects to be positioned as spectator to this return. But this is not exactly the case. In fact, Acker radically de-emphasizes visuality—"I want to do more that just see," says Eurydice (16)—and dismantles in the second section the spectatorial effects established in the work's first part. Her aim shifts from presenting the unknown strangely to imagining the unknowable. This shift entails showing us nothing less than how the dead live,[4] showing us through language paradoxically that which cannot possibly be seen.

To put things somewhat differently, the second part of *Eurydice in the Underworld*, beginning with Eurydice's absurdist and tragi-comically Beckettian[5] revelation that she's dead and "in the middle of dirt" and ending with Orpheus's re-establishment in "the realm of the living" (15, 25), exceeds the boundaries of the relatively traditional dramatic form that was established in the work's first part. There is no distinct scene to stage this part of the text, no proscenium-based setting in which to enact it, and no recognizable form to contain it. Acker narrates Eurydice's experience of death not through the conventionalities of dialogue, scene, or setting, but more experimentally through diaries, letters, and monologues. And she furthermore searches, as she has done in previous texts, for new narrative forms capable of textualizing what has been denied representation or considered radically other and unspeakable.

In *Eurydice*, Acker clearly has complex political as well as aesthetic aspirations as evidenced by her abandonment of established traditions regarding genre, dramatic structure, and character. The lack of creative power, the subjection to theatrical norms apparent in *Eurydice*'s first pages, gives way to a compelling literary experimentalism in the text's second part. Part of the death enacted, then, seems to be the death of traditional linguistic codes and structures. This death to old discursive norms involves the release of something new: a subversive textuality radically disruptive of univocality. Mimesis and realism increasingly break down in the work as You's voice fragments into a torrent of other voices including Plato's, Charlotte Brontë's of *Jane Eyre*, and including also the dissident, early twentieth century Russian voices of both Marina Ivanovna Tsvetaeva and Nadezhda Mandelstam. In the underworld, Eurydice, as she puts it, "wake[s] only for night. Night, when the roses here are red. Night, the room into which I can enter, the one where I can read. From Tsvetaeva: *It begins like a chapter in that novel* Jane Eyre. *The secret of the red room.* There are no secrets down here. There's only red" (19). For Eurydice, reading the texts of others is both a powerful comfort and luxury. It becomes an exercise in intersubjectivity in which "there are no secrets," and in which she can experience her own exile in relation to that experienced or written by others. Significant certainly is that each of the writers alluded to or retexualized in *Eurydice*'s second section—from Plato to Mandelstam—is not only literally dead, but also tied in some way to the experience of exile or to literary innovation, or, in some cases, to both of the above. For instance, Plato, many of whose works are written in dialogue form intended for performance, took refuge at Megara following Socrates's execution. Charlotte Brontë is differently connected to exile through her narrative about Jane Erye, who is abandoned as a child in Gateshead's red room[6] and then later consigned by her aunt to Lowood institution, a charity school for girls, which Brontë herself briefly attended. Leaving the Soviet Union in 1922, Tsvetaeva personally experienced self-exile in Berlin, Prague, and then Paris, and she furthermore writes about her émigré existence in highly original verse. Like Acker, Tsvetaeva also anticipates her own death, speaking in a "voice from under the grave" in poems like "Much Like Me" (l. 28).[7] And finally, Mandelstam as well faced internal exile for her husband's denouncements of Stalin and she produced two volumes of memoirs, *Hope against Hope* (1971) and *Hope Abandoned* (1974), about the experience of living under totalitarianism.

In *Eurydice*, then, it is both the writing and the exile of others that Acker resurrects. Eurydice's journey to the underworld furthermore shows I think how the experience of death can be transformed into a search for a new ideal of literary experimentalism and for a new ideal also (similar to the one Jones sees in contemporary body art) of interrelationship or collective subjectivity, in which not only is the discourse of others recognized and respected, but in which the self is negotiated through that discourse. Put another way, recalling dead voices from the past becomes an affirmative means paradoxically in Acker's text of shaping the future of the social.

Another voice present in *Eurydice* belongs to Assia Djebar, a contemporary francophone Maghrebian novelist, poet, playwright, filmmaker, and self-described "wandering exile" (*L'amour* 115). Unlike Acker's other intertextual allusions, however, Acker's single reference to Djebar comes in the form of an epigraph at the text's opening and reads as follows: "Childhood: 'A little Arab girl going to school for the first time, one autumn morning, walking hand in hand with her father. A tall, erect figure in a fez and a European suit, carrying a bag of school books'" (1). The Djebar quotation is taken from *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985), which has been translated from French into English as *Fantasia, An Algerian Cavalcade* (1993) and proposed by Djebar as the first volume of a quartet. The presence of the Djebar quotation explicitly invites us to consider the correspondences between Acker's and Djebar's literary themes and practices. In her work on Djebar's Algerian quartet, Mildred Mortimer describes *L'Amour* as a "polyphonic text" and "collective autobiography," in which Djebar inserts her own voice "within the community of Algerian women" revolutionaries and freedom fighters (3). Thus, *L'Amour, la fantasia*, Mortimer says, "explores links between personal and collective history," and thereby "widens the scope of autobiography to embrace the collective voice" (12, 3). In *Eurydice*, Acker practices a similar kind of autofiction or collective autobiography by joining her own voice not only to Djebar's contemporary feminist voice, but also to that of other past women writers and revolutionaries including, as we have seen, Brontë, Tsvetaeva, and Mandelstam. Essentially, then, the inclusion of other voices in *Eurydice* transforms Acker's personal story of pain and cancer into a much grander, collective history or performance not simply of death, but more provocatively of political and literary radicalism.

As Eurydice moves nomadically through the "realm of death"—its courtrooms, schools, labyrinths, its buildings "[c]omposed of rooms within rooms," and its "passage-ways that [...are] unable to be remembered"—the text becomes increasingly disorienting and ludic not only because of its intensifying multivocality and *mise-en-scène* designed to show how subjectivity is the product of various discourses and, hence, fragmented, but also on account of its radical non-linearity and abandonment of rationalism in favor of a new emotionalism or mode of perceiving "solely by feeling" (23, 15, 22, 21). In protest of the limitations of linearity, the text's second section unfolds associatively and in the process points to the undecidability of subject and object positions, of inside and outside. As Eurydice puts it, "[t]here's no more difference between what I'm seeing and who I think I am" (16). "I'm a bear," she says. "I'm in a hole. [...] I'm a seedling. [...] starting from nothing. So slowly" (16). In the short space of three pages, we experience the ontological uncertainty that accompanies the repudiation of being in favor of a perpetual becoming. And we move with Eurydice on a seemingly endless journey through a series of strangely abstracted places. We move from being "in the middle of dirt" to "travelling with three or four other girls" to a house on stilts, then to going to a "real building," then to another "house of which the first was an image." In the next shifting textual moment, Eurydice enters a taxi on the way to the airport to escape death; in the next moment, she is walking down a street "like those in London: narrow, filthy, winding" to get to a NatWest building (15-17). Eurydice's perambulating story of perpetual transformation and movement provocatively refuses closure. It unfolds it seems *ad infinitum*, embodying rupture and refusing not only clear purpose, perspective, or direction, but refusing also the sense of any clear teleological ending. For Acker, as the above quotations furthermore convey, the self is endlessly desiring and constantly in flux. *Eurydice in the Underworld*, as both Murray and Phelan would I think suggest, radically disrupts the notion of clear presence and instead marks the body or self predominantly as trace.

Jacques Derrida's work *Specters of Marx* and his concept of "spectrality" provide other ways of talking about Acker's thematic of death and about her avoidance of being in *Eurydice in the Underworld.* Not only can Derrida help us to understand Acker's rejection of ontology and her multivalent textuality, but likewise Acker's work allows us to grasp more clearly some of Derrida's own terms and arguments. In his account of *Specters*, Fredric Jameson writes that "Derrida's reserves about Marx, [...] all turn very specifically on this point, namely the illicit development of this or that Marxism [...] in the direction of what he calls ontology, that is to say, a form of the philosophical system (or metaphysics) specifically oriented around the conviction that it is some basic identity of being which can serve as a grounding [...] for thought" ("Marx's Purloined Letter" 37). Of interest to me is not exactly Derrida's philosophic relationship to Marx, but rather more generally his rejection of ontology in favor of what he calls "hauntology" and its coinciding discourse of "justice" and "ethics" beginning when we "learn to live with ghosts [...] to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself" (*Specters* xviii, 176). Derrida remarks that "this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations. [...] No justice," he continues, "seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present" (xix). By imagining her protagonist as a "being-with specters" through whom the dead—from Plato to Brontë to Tsvetaeva—speak, Acker, it seems to me, both practices the kind of politics and enacts the kind of responsibility about which Derrida writes. In this way, *Eurydice* can be seen as a literary instantiation of Derrida's "politics of memory," in which several perspectives are in play at once. Put another way, like Derrida (and coincidentally like Walt Whitman whom I cite at this chapter's opening), Acker questions the notion of the self-sufficiency of the living present, suggesting instead the profound intimacy between the living and the dead, and establishing thereby a politics of alterity (or of the wound) that, as Derrida would say, allows ghosts to speak.

In the last chapter of *Specters*, entitled "Apparition of the Inapparent," Derrida inquires further into the concept of the spectral. He writes: "The subject that haunts is not identifiable, one cannot see, localize, fix any form, one cannot decide between hallucination and perception, there are only displacements: one feels oneself looked at by what one cannot see" (136). I cite this passage not only because it strikes a cognate tone with the defamiliarizing experience of reading *Eurydice*, but also because the passage invokes implicitly the notion of the gaze in relation to the spectral, as well as the idea of being seen rather than seeing. This is important because part of Acker's aim in *Eurydice* is to disrupt and call into question the traditional spectatorial gaze with its implied separation between the viewer and the viewed. In the play's first section, Acker writes

Eurydice literally to some extent as the object of Orpheus's aestheticizing gaze. Early in the work, Orpheus views Eurydice in fact with aesthetic contemplation "*as if he's looking at a picture*" (2). And Eurydice, we have seen, becomes the object also of a more intrusive medical gaze that marks her as a diseased and wounded body viewable foremost in terms of its "*strangeness*" (14). I have noted that when Eurydice goes down into the underworld Acker underplays the notion of spectatorship itself by abandoning dominant dramatic conventions in favor of an imaginative experimentalism that emphasizes new modes of both representation and perception. In other words, when Eurydice dies she is freed it seems not only from Orpheus's gaze and from the medical gaze, but from the spectator's gaze as well. As Eurydice puts it, it is in the underworld that she escapes "being judged" and where she discovers an uncertain utopianism in the "free[dom] to begin travelling with [...] girls" (19, 15).

However, more than merely disrupting the spectator's gaze, *Eurydice* seems more provocatively to return it so that, in Derrida's terms, we feel looked at by what we cannot see. In his work on neo-avant-garde visual art, Hal Foster (as I discussed briefly in this dissertation's Introduction) points to a similar kind of visual reversal, in which the conventional dynamics of the gaze are startlingly deconstructed so that the object in fact looks back, in a sense, at the viewing subject "with all the glory (and horror) of its pulsatile desire" (*The Return* 140). What this perspectival shift means, Foster says, is that the conventional artistic "frame[s] of representation," the "screens" that have traditionally served to keep the "object gaze" at bay, have been radically displaced leaving us in what seems to be the unmediated and sublime presence of the real (149). Despite Foster's and Derrida's seemingly divergent terms, I am suggesting that Foster's notion of the real may share something with Derrida's notion of the spectral. Furthermore, I suggest that in a manner akin to much of the avant-garde visual art Foster addresses, *Eurydice in the Underworld* textually accomplishes a similar reversal or return of the object gaze, discomforting us by its abandonment of formal dramatic conventions, and by having its central protagonist articulate the unspeakable from a position of radical exile and otherness. Eurydice's pet name "You" serves in a related manner to confuse traditional phenomenological subject/object relations so that through linguistic play the reader and the work's dead protagonist become interchangeably involved to the extent that the text's imagery becomes in a way part of our own imaginary. Orpheus's late textual reference to Eurydice as "U-turn" is furthermore whimsically suggestive perhaps of the fact that Eurydice's narrative functions to return the gaze, or to deconstruct mainstream dramatic visuality and to evoke the return of "the real as such" (Foster 152).

Comparing the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice with Acker's retelling of the story helps to explain further Acker's use of the name "U-turn," and clarifies as well how the classical story preserves the "screen" or "veil" protecting us from the real, whereas Acker's postmodernist revision performs a new unveiling. In the classical myth, we experience the underworld from Orpheus's perspective (from the perspective of the living), whereas in Acker's retelling of the story we experience the underworld chiefly through Eurydice's voice and from the much different perspective of the dead. Furthermore, whereas in the old story Orpheus fails to see Eurydice much less to retrieve her from Hades, in *Eurydice in the Underworld* Acker reveals for us much more explicitly, albeit fantastically, what it might mean to die or to be dead. The name U-turn in the place of the proper name Eurydice signifies, then, not only the narrative movement toward death and the unknowable, but something more as well: the narrative return of the repressed and, in a manner of speaking, our full-frontal confrontation with the real, with death and with the unknown.

In earlier works like *In Memoriam to Identity* and *My Mother: Demonology*, Acker often explicitly writes the real in terms of feminine bodily abjection, and with insistent reference to things like abortion, menstrual blood, pelvic inflammatory disease, and masochistic eroticism. In *Eurydice in the Underworld*, Acker imagines the real predominantly through representations of the cancerous and then dead or absent body.[8] However, disturbing images of violated femininity are also present in the text. For instance, *Eurydice* confronts us not only with representations of Eurydice's own disfigurement through illness, but also with a subsequent disturbing reference to unnamed murdered girls who have horrifyingly been bled "from the feet" and then unceremoniously discarded, "thrown into the water" (15). This inclusion of the real in Acker's texts is far from apolitical in that her various references to feminine pain and passivity are often transformed in subsequent narrative moments so that testimonials of victimhood become poetic opportunities for the possibility of a new feminine solidarity. For example, the representation of the murdered girls in the text's second section gives way to a much different, mildly erotic lesbian representation conveyed by Eurydice in the following brief but nonetheless compelling passage: "I know there are girls down here," she says, "Who also live under the earth. Who put dirt into each other's mouths and take the same out with their lips" (20). The strange and gentle eroticism of these lines suggests I think that the real, like the sacred, has two sides. Acker's conceptualization of the real through her fantasy of the underworld contains both frightening and potentially utopian dimensions, and involves moreover the politicized attempt to imagine a new sense of relationship in the face of violence, pain, and marginalization.

Not only does *Eurydice*'s performance writing upset conventional dramatic visuality in order to access the real, but it is linked furthermore to the work of mourning. The final chapter of Phelan's *Mourning Sex*, entitled "Infected eyes: Dying Man With A Movie Camera, *Silverlake Life: The View from Here*," contains certain assertions about Tom Joslin's 1993 video diary of his own dying from AIDS that I think serve incidentally also to illuminate the relationship of performance and mourning in Acker's work. One of Phelan's most remarkable assertions about Joslin's film is that "it might make sense to think of [it as] a cinema for the dead" (156). Such a cinema, argues Phelan, "links the moving image to death" and "is one place where the still-moving body leaves a trace" (156). Cinema for the dead, continues Phelan, "has a specially curative appeal in relation to mourning [in that if] one of the things we grieve over is the end signified by death, a cinema for the dead reveals that such an end keeps moving, and [in fact] does not end" (156). Addressing *Silverlake Life* more specifically and speaking of the "transfer the film enacts," Phelan writes that "Joslin's dying stages the spectator's confrontation with the deaths he or she wants to repress – the spectator's own, and / or the memories and anticipations of the deaths of our beloveds" (162). The film *Silverlake Life* is "a prompt," she says, "that enables us to enter an interior cinema that projects our own living and dying" (163).

Eurydice in the Underworld and *Silverlake Life* are admittedly markedly different productions: while *Eurydice* has fantastic and tragicomic overtones, *Silverlake Life* is much more thoroughly ensconced in the realist tradition of sociopolitical documentary.

However, the fact that *Eurydice* was originally published on-line and in serial form as a work in progress[9] makes it in some sense "cinematic," in that it appears as a progressive unveiling of the process of dying. Also connecting the two works is the fact that they incorporate similar strategies, questioning our epistemological relationship to death. Both stage the death of the author or filmmaker as ultimate signified of the text, producing art as a form of memorial wherein the dead still live or wherein absence itself comes strangely into representational presence. Whereas Joslin's film postulates the connection between cinema and death, Acker's production resolutely postulates a similar connection (or temporality) between language and death. In short, Joslin is involved in the creation of a "cinema for the dead," while Acker's experimentalism opens new literary (and hypertextual) spaces for the dead. Perhaps most compelling about these two works are the ways in which they both, either through film or textuality, transform the experience of mourning one's own death into a new opportunity for creative production. D. H. Lawrence once wrote that we shed our sickness through art. It seems to me that in many ways Joslin and Acker shed their mourning and their melancholy through art. This is especially true with *Eurydice* where Acker's mourning for her own dying becomes a poetic and imaginative opportunity for a new life wherein, "We are [nothing less than] gods. [...] and there are trees, small oddly shaped in that they bend rather than reach up toward the sky, down to the ground, where there's a rose above the earth" (22).

Another shared provocation of Acker's and Joslin's works, to borrow Phelan's psychoanalytic terminology, is the "psychic transference" they both produce in which subject and object positions become inextricably intertwined. In *Silverlake Life*, as Phelan says, fantasies of our deaths and of those we love are "*released* by the film," or, more specifically, by the death of the other the film stages (164). We see our own deaths, in other words, through Joslin's death. Or, as Acker might simply put it, the film "shows you you."[10] *Eurydice in the Underworld*, we have seen, accomplishes a similar revelation or release. Through linguistic play and renaming in which the character Eurydice becomes "You" (becomes in a sense the reader) and through the narrative emphasis upon interiority in which we move through various "stations" closer and closer to the intimacy of death, Acker's text provocatively destabilizes the assumption that death in fact resides elsewhere, outside of the viewing or reading subject. Bataille tells us in *Eroticism: Death & Sensuality* that continuity between the self and the other is death, or, more simply, that death signifies the profound interconnection of the self and the other. Bataille's notion finds, I think, considerable corroboration in both Acker's and Joslin's productions, where, to borrow again from Phelan, "I cannot, you cannot, make it out (alive)" (163).

As an ending to this essay, I argue finally that Acker's performativity can be found not only in her disruption of the divisions between viewer and viewed, self and other, the living and the dead, but also in her disregard of the boundaries between high theory and art. Put differently, my focus turns to how Acker performs high theory or to how she uses textual practice to interrogate and also audaciously to advance theory itself. In *Eurydice*, Maurice Blanchot's theories take center stage, so-to-speak. While *Eurydice* can be viewed *in relation to* Phelan's, Jones's, and Murray's contemporary performance theories, Acker's text explicitly draws upon Blanchot's theories of art and *enacts* more intimately and self-consciously his notions regarding the presence of death in language. In order to discuss how *Eurydice* manages to become the site of genuine theoretical renewal in which Blanchot's theories are not only rearticulated but in fact extended, I outline briefly some of the propositions Blanchot makes in two of his essays: "Literature and the Right to Death" and "The Gaze of Orpheus."

While the Anglo-American critical tradition might generally be said to celebrate artistic and literary affirmation, Blanchot develops a different critical language encouraging us to see the essential connection between literature, negativity, and death. Influenced by Heidegger, Hegel, and Bataille among others, one of Blanchot's major contributions to critical theory is his identification of literary language with the experience of death. In "Literature and the Right to Death," Blanchot argues that "death [...] is present in [...] language" for the simple reason that words exclude the existence of what they designate and thereby perform loss (42). "The torment of language," writes Blanchot, "is what it lacks" (45). Words imply the absence of things themselves and hence negation, as Blanchot says, "is tied to language" and language "can only begin with the void" (43). If we are to write, Blanchot tells us, "we must see death" (54). Echoing Hegel's "Preface" to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Blanchot asserts more positively that the language of literature "is *the life that endures death and maintains itself in it*" (54).[11] In "The Gaze of Orpheus," Blanchot theorizes further his notion of the connection between literature and death, using the figure of Orpheus as a model for the artist whose work "demands" that he look back toward Eurydice to see "the fullness of her death living in her" (100). In Blanchot's understanding, Eurydice signifies death, the void, the unknown, and perhaps most profoundly the "limit of what art can attain" (99).

By writing her own cancerous body and by giving voice to the experience of death, Acker insistently strives in *Eurydice* both to reveal to us "the fullness of her [own] death living in her," and to write what has been effaced or symbolically buried in the cultural imaginary. In her attempt to present that which has been considered unspeakable, unknowable, and beyond the limits of representation, Acker enacts through narrative Blanchot's notion that the artist must write with death in view. *Eurydice*, moreover, is as much about the trauma of dying as it is strangely about the living that can occur after dying, or, in Blanchot-Hegel's terms, about "*the life that endures death and maintains itself in it*." As I imagine Acker's Eurydice, she is a revenant body who has died and been repressed in the cultural imaginary, but who has nonetheless endured death and gone on strangely to discover a new life connected to many others.

When read alongside *Eurydice in the Underworld*, Blanchot's theorizations, then, (specifically about death being present in language, about the "torment [or tragedy] of language" being "what it lacks," and about Eurydice being the aim of art) assume strangely literal resonance. That *Eurydice* questions the privileging of presence and is explicitly about the experiences of dying and of being dead, are all points that serve to illustrate Blanchot's notion that death, language, and absence are somehow intimately linked. We have seen Acker thematize her own authorial absence through intertextual and polyphonic literary practice in her other works, and we have seen her emphasize the loss of private consciousness or selfhood before in books like *In Memoriam to Identity* and *My Mother: Demonology* where various narrative voices recognize the fiction of "enclosed or self-sufficient being" and experience the "I" becoming "traces of dust" (*Demonology* 30, 46). Although *Eurydice in the Underworld* is a post-realist work like Acker's other fictions, the biographical circumstances of its production (namely, Acker's own impending death during its composition) make *Eurydice*'s textualizations of loss seem somehow more profoundly *real* and troubling as well. *Eurydice* is not strictly speaking autobiography, but it nonetheless exploits autobiography (thanatography is perhaps more accurate) in unsettling ways to the provocative extent that Acker seems uncannily to speak from the grave. The text's posthumous publication contributes to the strange sense that in a new way Acker pushes the limits of language (in Blanchot's terms, she pushes the "limit of what art can attain"), and succeeds in speaking the unspeakable from nothing less in fact than the impossible position of her own death.

That Acker was thinking of Blanchot's theories of art during the composition of *Eurydice* is suggested explicitly by her reference to him near the text's close. In a section of the fiction entitled "Orpheus," Acker writes: "Maurice Blanchot says that Eurydice is the extreme to which art, Orpheus's art can attain. [...] For Blanchot, art comes out of such a moment. Everything must be sacrificed to that moment: seeing that which is hidden" (23). The sacrifice it seems to me that Acker makes in *Eurydice in the Underworld* is to envision and, in the process, to mourn her own sickness and death. In doing so, as I have argued, she opens language and textuality toward "that which is [normally] hidden" from view. Acker, moreover, does not simply reveal to us the unknown; she goes further, both inhabiting and speaking from a position of supposed lack. Acker, in other words, goes beyond merely assuming the Orphic gaze, so-to-speak; in *Eurydice*, she attempts "the extreme" by shifting the perspective and allowing Eurydice's voice itself to be heard (or, in Foster's terms, allowing the real to be spoken) from a place supposedly inaccessible to and beyond the limits of language.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in Acker's *Eurydice in the Underworld* the classical roles of Orpheus and Eurydice are both re-inscribed and in provocative ways also undone. In the text's first and, relatively speaking, theatrically conventional section, although Eurydice is a speaking subject, she is also constructed as the object of Orpheus's aestheticizing gaze and of a clinically detached medical gaze as well. In the classical story of Eurydice and Orpheus, Eurydice's death scripts her into a position of unknowability and lack. Acker's retelling of the old story challenges this purely negative inscription. By giving innovative, artistic form to the experience of death and by re-imagining death, Acker's *Eurydice* enacts something in excess of the classical narrative that motivates it. Also complicating and re-inflecting the original story is Acker's autobiographical allusiveness. As the author of *Eurydice in the Underworld*, Acker is positioned as Orpheus, as the artist whose greatest aim is to unveil "that which is hidden." Mourning her own loss, Acker meanwhile still casts herself as Eurydice, as the one who is dying and then dead, and, hence, presumably unspeakable. In so doing, Acker points clearly to the exchangeability of subject and object, self and other. By involving or presenting her own dying body in her work, moreover, Acker insists on performance writing as a radical exchange between author and reader. More exactly, she stages a transference or phenomenological intertwining wherein the reader becomes inextricably and intimately connected to death. In short, and paraphrasing Phelan, the major phenomenological provocation of Acker's death story is that we cannot come out of it alive.

Notes

1. A version of this chapter has been accepted for publication in the book *Devouring Institutions*, edited by Michael Hardin and published by San Diego State UP, 2004. 187-207.

2. Although neither Derrida nor Foster addresses performance art explicitly, some of their recent arguments (in Derrida's case about ghosts, ethics, and justice and in Foster's about the contemporary destruction of certain visual artistic conventions) are not only relevant to Acker's literary aims and methods in *Eurydice*, but they intersect intellectually in some ways as well with the work being done by radical performance theoreticians.

3. Kathy O'Dell use the phrase "limit-text" in her book *Contract With the Skin: Masochism Performance Art and the 1970s*, where she defines the masochistic performance works of artists like Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, and Gina Pane as "limit-texts" that query boundaries and "expose […] meanings that are obscured in other performance or in more conventional art" (3). As a limit-text, Acker's *Eurydice* is not an explicitly masochistic performance, but it nonetheless attempts to cross boundaries (for instance, between life and death, subject and object) normally preserved in more traditional or realist texts.

4. English novelist Will Self has recently produced a work in fact entitled *How the Dead Live* (2000). His narrative is a tragicomic story about a character named Lily Bloom who dies of cancer, but goes on strangely to experience a new living death. In Self's fantastic imaginings, the dead do not simply die, but continue to inhabit "subtle bodies" (257). Self's notion that death implies not necessarily an end, but rather another series of experiences yet to be told connects him provocatively to Acker. Both writers can perhaps be seen as belonging to a shared narrative tradition that seeks to open new representational spaces for the dead, and to give, thereby, a new time to the body.

5. In Samuel Beckett's play *Happy Days*, published in 1961, the central protagonist and monologist Winnie is buried in a mound of earth and slowly sinking inevitably toward death and decay. Beckett's Winnie and Acker's Eurydice are unalike in that whereas Winnie sees death existentially in terms of nothingness and the void, Eurydice sees death postmodernistically as a new limit, and a new series of images, perceptions, and movements to be narrated and interpreted. Despite these differences, however, I contend that Acker's questioning of the conventional assumption that life and death are radically distinct states inserts her into the absurdist theatrical tradition of which Beckett was a major proponent.

6. In *Jane Erye*, Brontë writes that the red room "was chill, […], silent, […] solemn, […] seldom entered. […] Mrs Reed herself, at far intervals, visited it to review the contents of a certain secret drawer in the wardrobe, where […was] stored […] a miniature of her deceased husband; and in those last words lies the secret of the red-

room – the spell which kept it so lonely in spite of its grandeur" (45-46). The secret of the red room plainly is the secret of the ghost or of death itself, which in Brontë's text are things dreaded and to be avoided. In *Eurydice*, conversely, Acker welcomes ghosts and the discourse of the dead as her citations from so many deceased authors attests. Acker, furthermore, resignifies Brontë's red room and in the process she resignifies death itself as an opening up of new possibilities for creative production: "Red's alive," she writes, "It's everywhere tonight [...]. Red's the color of nerves when there is green. [...] This is the beginning of the red room. [...] Poetry [...]" (19).

7. Tsvetaeva's connection to Acker extends beyond her similar use of exile and death as negative means of figuring the subject. In 1923, Tsvetaeva in fact wrote a poem entitled "Eurydice to Orpheus," in which, like Acker in *Eurydice*, she fashions a voice for Eurydice and in the process questions the conventional boundaries between life and death. Two lines from Greg Simon's recent translation of Tsvetaeva's poem appearing in the on-line magazine *Salt River Review* read as follows: "You, who are flesh, are a ghost – and in death, / I am alive" (l.14-15).

8. As *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978) suggests, Acker has long been preoccupied with the real in its various manifestations. In *Blood and Guts*, Acker tells the story of Janey, a young woman suffering first from pelvic inflammatory disease and then later, like Eurydice, from cancer. Although Janey dies near the text's ending, the narrative continues with an epilogue without her, indicating that something remains after the body disappears.

9. On-line see the site http://acker.thehub.com.au/eumenu.html where early drafts of *Eurydice in the Underworld* appear in serial form under the following titles: "Dream of the Underworld," "Journal Written in the Underworld," "A Courtroom in the Underworld," and "A School in the Underworld."

10. I take this phrase from "On Delany the Magician" in which Acker praises Delany's *Trouble on Triton* writing that, "Every search for the other, for Eurydice, is also the search for the self. [...]Delany has seen Eurydice's face, for he is [...] the magician. Look at his language. Call it 'poetic language.' [...] The last part of this creative process is you entering the same language by reading until the language shows you you" (63).

11. In his "Preface" to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel writes: "the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untroubled by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it" (19).

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CONCLUSION:

The "Obscene Thing" and Women's Writing on the Dark Side

Part 1: Acker, Kasischke, Steinke, and the Construction of a "Dark" Feminist Literary Tradition

Living is: advancing straight toward the unknown to the point of getting lost. At the risk of losing ourselves. It takes risk. [...] We are always in the midst [...] of being killed.
Hélène Cixous, *FirstDays of the Year* 35, 71[1]

The reason why we are heroic is because we are [...] flawed.
Deborah Levy, *Billy and Girl* 145[2]

Each of the texts I have considered in this study—all of them edgy and strange—is written in the "dark" or "black" tradition, a tradition in fact usually associated with male writers like Bataille, de Sade, Burroughs, and Joyce. In their transgressive explorations of sadomasochism, violence, the death drive, and death itself, Kasischke, Steinke, and Acker produce extremist art that probes the wound and furthermore shows us that the linking of violence, eroticism, and death is by no means a uniquely male practice. For me, the attraction of these three authors is that they eschew romantic or "good-girl" narratives and give voice instead to forms of femininity that are distinctly—sometimes disturbingly—incautious, unproductive, limit-breaking, and moribund. Each of the writers of study shows us female protagonists *in extremis*, pushed beyond certain boundaries normally observed; each shows us women characters trying to die, or, in fact as we have just seen in Acker's *Eurydice*, dying and then dead. Kasischke's, Steinke's, and Acker's negative pursuits take us often explicitly into the realm of masochistic female eroticism, in which we witness young women putting themselves in situations of abject risk and danger. This kind of writing practice that goes all the way with what

Juliet Flower MacCannell has termed the "obscene Thing" (that avoids the temptation, in other words, to cover over violence, over experiences of self-sacrificial, lethal *jouissance*, or over the reality of the corpse) does not allow for an easy reading experience. Sometimes the images of wounding or dying that occur in these three novelists' books strangely cut and scar the reader also. In *The Cinematic Body*, Steven Shaviro addresses the masochistic pleasures involved in cinematic viewing, claiming that "what film offers its viewers is something [...] compelling and disturbing: a Bataillean ecstasy of expenditure, of automutilation and self-abandonment [...] the blinding intoxication of contact with the real" (53). Acker's, Kasishcke's, and Steinke's different masochistic textual aesthetics I think offer the reader something quite similar: the chance to abandon his or her quotidian self and instead to experience a self-shattering dispossession—continuity or a death essentially without dying. I am not suggesting, as Shaviro might, that we take delight or pleasure in all of the images of wounding, pain, and death we see in these texts, but only that we too are broken in some way by such traumatic witnessing and thereby brought into a sociality of the wound.

Acker, Kasischke, and Steinke's shared novelistic emphasis upon loss cuts across, I use Bataille's language, the dominant homogeneous order and attendant "appropriative morality" dictating that we should all hold back, take care, and save ourselves, rather than spend or put ourselves at risk ("The Use Value" 99). In this sense, each of the novelists of study undoubtedly can be counted as a subversive writer radically disdainful of propriety, and producing a form of thought "that does not fall apart in the face of horror, [...] that does not steal away when it is time to explore [...] the limit" (Bataille, "Preface" to *History of Eroticism* 14). Kasischke's subversiveness lies in the fact that she not only has her protagonist seek the greatest loss and degradation, but she distinctly poeticizes and eroticizes absolute self-disinvestiture—the journey to the end. By having Leila come through the death accorded to her by Gary Jensen and his brigade of sadistic fellows, Kasischke furthermore affords her protagonist a certain heroism born of abjection. Steinke similarly show us how we can be both compelled and repulsed by death—how we might follow it, want to lose ourselves, and then be permitted, as the minister's daughter Ginger is, to draw back our hesitating feet. Like *Suspicious River*, *Jesus Saves* effectively and subversively writes a marginal feminine space that has been made largely unspeakable by dominant cultural discourses; like *Suspicious River*, Steinke's novel furthermore works to transform a story of pain, passivity, and degeneration into one of heroism. She shows us, in other words, both the horror and power of the wounded margins. Where Kasischke poeticizes abjection, Steinke, through her experimentations with fantasy (and consequent turn from conventional literary realism), provides an insurgent aesthetics of abjection. In this way, not only are Steinke's thematics of loss disruptive, but so too does her creative use of language itself embody fracture.

Of the three novelists of study in this dissertation, Acker, undoubtedly, is the most revolutionary and far-reaching. Writing in an ambitiously experimental way in order to access and find a language for other feminine spaces, Acker takes her readers to task demanding considerably more from us than either Kasischke or Steinke. Acker's experimental aestheticism, which includes the extensive use of techniques such as intertextuality, nonlinear narrative, ungrammatical and nonsensical prose, repetition, and libidinally charged language, functions both to accent the margin's fragmentation and heteroglossiac disorder, and also to provide the margins with its own poetics or aesthetics. While Acker, more than either Steinke or Kasischke, explores and underscores the politics of language and struggles additionally to form new meanings through avant-garde disruption, she nonetheless shares with both Steinke and Kasischke a deep fixation on the contemporary trauma of the subject. Like Kasischke's and Steinke's predominantly realist texts, Acker's avant-garde productions present scene upon scene of feminine abjection, degradation, and wounding. From *In Memoriam to Identity* to *My Mother: Demonology* to *Eurydice in the Underworld*, Acker, it seems to me, pushes ever further in her pursuit of the real. In *In Memoriam*, she shows us brutalized protagonists: girls and women raped, opened, diseased, junked up, and commodified. But like Kasischke and Steinke, she also shows us abjection transformed into a viable site of collective resistance. Through a radical intertextual practice calling upon the subversions of the historical avant-garde (specifically upon Arthur Rimbaud and his defiant declaration, "*Je* est un autre"), she posits an historical consciousness or a collective subjectivity, and thereby shows us the political potentiality of a sociality of the wound. In *Demonology*, Acker similarly writes her way through feminine victimization and into new, uncertain emancipatory spaces, before ending her novel ultimately at the edge of death and in a startling and strange moment of "bestial howling." *Eurydice* goes further: speaking the supposed unspeakable, actually inhabiting death, and furthermore placing the reader or viewer precisely in the cut, so-to-speak, Acker's *Eurydice*, unflinching limit-text *par excellence*, does nothing less than reveal community, the continuity of "my death" in "thy death."[3]

Acker, Kasischke, and Steinke are united, then, in their shared attempt to give voice to experiences normally muted or silenced in dominant discourses, or considered simply unrepresentable. Although Acker unquestionably is the most complexly experimental of the three, each author searches in her own way for narrative forms capable of textualizing the female subject's nearly unspeakable experiences. Each writer furthermore defies sexual conventions: each refuses, for instance, to see femininity in terms solely of procreative functioning, and instead attempts more fully to image a female erotics that in fact takes up rather than averts the negativity of death. Although many of the heroines we encounter in the narratives of study disclaim maternity symbolically by having abortions, the mother nonetheless becomes an important figure specifically for Kasischke and Acker. In different ways, Acker and Kasischke aim to counter the cultural disavowal and silencing of the mother. In *Suspicious River*, we see how the mother's wounds penetrate the daughter to the core, how they shape a particular lethal desire in the daughter and offer an occasion for imitation. We see also the mother's sociocultural repression in small town America as well as her powerful, iconographic and linguistic return ("she is the world without end, amen […] my mother speaks to me, in a voice of water" [265-66]) in a moment of healing at the fiction's close. Acker too rehabilitates the figure of the mother. In her narrative production as a whole, granted, Acker depicts the mother in a largely unbecoming light. Melancholic, narcissistic, drug-addicted, and self-confined and stifled in bedrooms, the mother in Acker's literary production is often a figure of disconnection and not affiliation for the girl. And yet strangely Acker will not leave the mother alone, will not leave her in a state of paralysis or *déréliction*, but in fact returns to the mother, radically re-imagining her in the novel *Demonology*. Although *My Mother: Demonology* is a fiction strikingly different from *Suspicious River*, it shares with Kasischke's text a similar structure in that it takes us through "the belly of hell" before showing us the way "out in the form of healing." Certain points bear reiterating about the figure of the mother in *Demonology*: first, she is based upon the avant-garde, subversive French writer Laure Peignot; second, Acker draws attention throughout *Demonology* to the mother's voice by telling us repeatedly that "my mother spoke"; and third, Acker herself claims Laure as a mother while simultaneously in effect becoming her by conflating her own biography and voice with that of Laure's.

Acker and Kasischke's shared stress upon the mother and upon the mother-daughter relation is, I think, significant and not just coincidental. Their shared preoccupation suggests that in women's narratives about abjection, wounding, and the possibility for healing, the problem of the mother is crucial and not to be dismissed or glossed over. What Acker and Kasischke point to ultimately with their different stories about becoming "my mother," is not only the troubling reality of traumatic repetition, but also the importance of a maternal genealogy in the trajectory toward healing. They point, in other words, to the possibility of a female (social) subjectivity not predicated on the rejection of the maternal, but rather on a restoration of her symbolic and linguistic power.

As should be clear by now, in each of the texts of study (including Steinke's), although we are confronted explicitly by horror's allure and by the traumatic real of the subject, recovery or transformation is in itself a significant textual trajectory. In *Suspicious River*, for example, Leila (who throughout most of the fiction sees herself abjectly as a woman "[r]eady to be slapped. Or stabbed" [248]) is changed in the end and manages to rescript an inherited story of death into the possibility for a new life, wherein the blood of wounds might heal and, as she puts it, form a "new, tougher skin" (264). In

Jesus Saves, the protagonist Ginger also escapes what seems to be traumatically inevitable. In her encounter with the troll, she shows us the possibility of strength and resistance in the face of horror. And yet even as Ginger manages to avert Sandy Patrick's lethal fate, Steinke in the end places Ginger back in the dead girl's bedroom and family home, forcing us thereby to reflect on the possibility that the quest for change or healing can fall back into eerily familiar patterns. Steinke points, in other words, to the difficulty of making new meanings, of finding somewhere new or safe to go in a sacrificial or sadistic age in which the official symbolic order has lapsed. This trepidation or sense of stasis that we find in Steinke's fiction is not to be found in Acker's. More than either Kasischke or Steinke, Acker manages I think to sketch the future possibility, to find in fact somewhere to go beyond horror, to discover and to write, I borrow from MacCannell, "what of the human remains after a certain [...] limit has been surpassed" (11).

While both Kasischke and Steinke end their fictions essentially at the moment of crisis when their protagonists face off against the "obscene Thing" and stagger away assaulted and battered but free, Acker, intent always on going further across the limit, shows us something more. Her narratives, in other words, do not end with the moment of confrontation or escape, but take off or take flight—I cite Laure from *Demonology*—from "this moment of beginning" (221). Devoting its entire second part to showing us the forms or figures healing might take, Acker's *Demonology* is perhaps most readily seen as visionary, as providing a guide of sorts to the future or vanguard female subject. *In Memoriam to Identity* as well, specifically "The Wild Palms" section, begins to glimpse, to give body and voice to the future feminine subject. Providing a summary description of Acker's "impossible character who has found a way through" horror is no easy task (MacCannell 32). Briefly, she is in fact a social subject pursuing creative things like writing new narrative (as is the case of Laure/Acker in *Demonology*) or performing the art of "making smashing dolls" (as is the case of Airplane in *In Memoriam*). Acker's references to her protagonists' creative engagements with the world are not coincidental but on the contrary intentional. We have seen that part of Acker's own experimental and contestatory practice involves constructing a new language or poetics, with the implication that any significant sociocultural or political change begins at the linguistic and symbolic level. By creating female protagonists, who are artistic innovators themselves, Acker re-emphasizes on a narrative (rather than purely linguistic) level that the possibility or formation of a new world implies a new language and symbolism, a new foundation for culture.

Acker's future or frontier female subjects, although their careers provide them some attachment to the social or symbolic order, are also part self-exiled, part postmodern nomads always in uncertain transit. They refuse, in other words, to settle down geographically or physically and display also a critical consciousness that resists settling into homogeneous modes of thought and behavior. Making connections without appropriating or holding the other down, they are able, moreover, to flow dynamically, generously, and promiscuously from one lover or set of experiences to another. In the above respects, Acker's heroines remain outside the norm or "outside the accepted," and as such they will "always [...] be strange" (*Dem* 253, 245). Ultimately, then, through her radical female portraits, Acker, it seems to me, uncovers the possibility for an ironic form of subjecthood (or being-in-the-world) that aims, on the one hand, to transform the social order by creatively re-imagining it, and that seeks, on the other hand, lines of flight (to be Deleuzean) or a viable social space outside the homogeneous.

Part 2: Future Reading: Some Other Women Writers Drawn to the Wound

Throughout this conclusion (and the dissertation generally) I have attended more to Acker, championing her as the most subversively limit-breaking of the three novelists under study. However, each writer in her own right is worthy certainly of attention. In fact, Steinke and Kasischke are relatively young writers still producing literature. Having gone already (so early in their careers) all the way, as MacCannell might say, with the "obscene Thing," both writers possess a valuable store of knowledge. We need to stay attentive I think to what more they might have to say and teach us. We need to remain alert also to other emerging writers of the wound, engaged in similar experimental work, and attempting to express and make sense of the contemporary trauma of the female subject. Throughout the course of writing this dissertation I have tried to do just this—to remain watchful or mindful of works by other authors trying to characterize such raw, and perhaps as yet, incompletely articulated experiences like abjection, trauma, and sadomasochism. In doing so, I have been struck by the growing multiplicity and international community of women writers preoccupied by the wound. There seems to be no shortage, in other words, of contemporary women authors (not just American, but also Canadian, British, New Zealander, and French, for instance) writing in a black (bad-girl or late feminist) counter tradition. What this growing body of dark writing suggests is that experiences of abjection and woundedness are not aberrations for women, but a marked reality of urgent concern. The proliferation of female authorship on the dark side suggests additionally that, contrary perhaps to patriarchal assumptions about women's writing as being largely (and unexperimentally) concerned with romantic and domestic issues, women writers are significantly engaged in explorations of the negative, in innovative practice, and in questions about power. As an end to this dissertation, then, I point briefly to some other courageous women authors (including the New Zealand novelist Kirsty Gunn, the Canadian writer Rebecca Godfrey, and the emerging American novelist Leslie Schwartz) who, like Acker, Kasischke, and Steinke, confront the traumatic real, and have begun thereby to articulate the subject's most difficult, nearly unspeakable experiences. In opening the discussion to new authors, I am not suggesting that they take us further than Kasischke, Steinke, or Acker in their explorations of abjection, nihilism, or negativity, but simply that they too give voice to marginal realities normally eclipsed, and should consequently be counted among those contemporary writers producing audaciously extremist art.[4]

In her second novel *The Keepsake* (1997), New Zealand writer Kirsty Gunn provides a story certainly as disturbing and daring as any of the primary narratives of study in this thesis. Written, like Kasischke's *Suspicious River*, in an indulgently rhapsodic and poetic style, *The Keepsake* uncovers the most unseemly and devastating of experiences: father-daughter incest, vicious sadomasochism, mutilation, torture, and starvation—experiences, as the narrator says, that nullify the self, that leave "*space inside me.* [...] *nothing there*" (157). Gunn's troubling book is about what might make someone want to be hurt, want "[t]he cut, the fine, fine threads that no one else can see" (156). It is about being fixed in melancholy, fixed strangely in the wound and in "these days of pain" (58). Narrated by an unnamed young woman who is also the central character, *The Keepsake* gives voice to a heroine who essentially wants to die, to reach a point of zero excitation like that of the dead girl she sees in a book, "a girl with a single thread of blood running down the centre of her white body, where she'd been cut" (80). Although *The Keepsake* shows us something horrible (a protagonist *in extremis* and becoming seemingly a vacant body with which a man "can do anything," "lay [...] it out," burn it, put it "up against the wall, or on the table where insects crawl" [143]), the startlingly incongruous beauty of Gunn's writing keeps us reading this difficult story of pain and sadomasochism.

As in *Suspicious River*, in *The Keepsake* the mother (her drug-addiction, her abundant sensuality, her humiliation, her death drive, and her story about love turned torturous into "a fine blade" [44]) plays an especially important role in the fiction and is central to the unnamed daughter-narrator's nihilist subject formation. In Gunn's narrative, the figure of the mother and the daughter's emotions about her are multifold and complex. For the daughter, the mother is "beautiful and shocking," corporeal and exotic—an object of desire and libidinal attachment: "Before anything else," says the daughter, "there was my mother. The hand came on me, the fingers wrapped around my arm ... But before anything else, before him ... It was always her" (37, 21). In the daughter's memory, the mother is sexually, transgressively, and excessively imagined. The mother has "the darting eyes of addiction," "she's dancing too much, talking too much [...] the back of her dress is pulled down too much," and she is always lying down and languidly entertaining men who bring "the powder that would later kill her" (40, 42, 16). There are troubling scenes, furthermore, suggesting maternal incest, numerous bathing scenes in which the daughter is "trapped [...] in warm water," held captive by the mother's "urgent touching" (45). In addition to becoming an object of the mother's own desire, the daughter also becomes a repository for her stories about father-daughter incest, about violent and sick marital love, and ultimately about the devastation of abandonment. The daughter becomes, in other words, a repository of memory and then also an agent of narrative repetition. When she finds "a lover for [...her] self"—one who will use her, scar her, and break her—she has, she tells us, "the writing in me already [...] I could [...be] my mother" (11). "Repeating," she says, "is a truth of nature." "I lie still on my bed, as rag, as the cut skin, and women continue their pattern, they turn, and they turn . . . Mother. Daughter. They rise, they fall, the same. [...] in the end nothing will protect me from who I will become. It is fixed, like the branches of the tree are fixed like wire in winter" (149-51).

In large part, then, *The Keepsake* explores socio-psychological processes of mimetic reproduction; it explores how we become gendered subjects or become women who see themselves primarily in the wound. And yet, despite the novel's emphasis upon traumatic repetition, death, and the awful weight of history, like many of the primary works of study in this dissertation, *The Keepsake* enacts transformation and offers a feminist and liberating reworking of inherited narrative structures. In the end, in other words, the daughter seeks to rescript the mother's story—she seeks to open a space of active resistance, to move beyond bondage and sadism (literally out of her bed) and toward the freer life of "the street [...and] all the spring air" (213). In this movement from repetition to resistance, Gunn's heroine discovers essentially a subjectivity of her own, a subjectivity different from the one imposed on her. She remarks significantly at the fiction's close about being called "by [... her own] name, no one else's name, not a father's name or a mother's name" (213), implying thereby her newfound subject status. She speaks in the novel's final passages also about becoming a writer, about "these pages laid out smooth on my desk" (209), and hence stresses the political importance of writing itself as a means of conceiving a new female subjectivity.

Leslie Schwartz's debut novel *Jumping the Green* (1999) also provides an uncensorious look at sadomasochistic practice and at why women might want to pursue death through violent eroticism. Told in Louise Goldblum's first person protagonist voice, the novel opens forthrightly as follows: "My discovery of masturbation is accompanied by the sudden epiphany that lovers slap each other around. Passion and love are fraught with this delight between the legs, this slap in the face, this wedding of pain and pleasure" (11). Succeeding this remark, Louise goes on to explain how the discovery of her own sexuality is linked to her girlhood witnessing of an episode of violent eroticism between her neighbors, the Kowolskis, who hit and verbally insult one another before having what seems to be generously loving sex. Although this neighborhood s / m scene (and others like it) marks a formative experience for Louise, its full effects are nonetheless not felt until Louise is nearly thirty and struggling with her sister Ester's violent and eroticized murder. Obsessed with memories of Ester (who Louise describes as possessing both a "love of risk" and a belief in the interchangeability of "filth and beauty" [265, 169]), Louise deals with her death essentially by trying to copy the circumstance in which her sister was lost, and thereby see her own death through the death of the other. *Jumping the Green* explores, then, processes of mirroring or of mimetic reproduction much like those investigated in many of the other trauma narratives discussed throughout the thesis. Increasingly "hungry for [self-] annihilation" and wanting to get "into the head of the dying" or actually to die at least "for an instant," Louise engages in increasingly ruinous and risky behavior, drawn onward in an effort to rejoin or re-find her sister through mimicry (39, 146). Desiring "blunt, practical cruelty," her own violent "disgrace," as well as lovers "scarred" and "devoted [like herself] to darkness, sex, and death" and "to going to the end of the earth," Louise sets out to discover "*How far [...] it [is] possible to fall*" (62, 215, 159, 256, 49). She aims to discover how "to live as though dead" (151). When she meets the sadist Zeke, a tattooed and pierced fellow artist and "nihilistic postmodernist" like herself, Louise's pursuit of the edge intensifies as Zeke aims, as she says, to "break me apart, tear me from limb to limb. [...] leave bruises everywhere, on my thighs, knees, forearms. [...] Maybe [...] try to kill me" (48, 203, 207).

Through the course of the narrative, however, Schwartz's protagonist ultimately reaches "the apex of aversion" (or what she calls "the exact place where the desire to know something [...metamorphoses] into a strong reaction against knowing it"), and she stops short in her grim quest for the extreme knowledge and humiliation of death (207). Although she comes close, she does not die, but instead recovers from loss, leaves Zeke, and even seemingly abandons the "caustic pleasure" of sadomasochistic practice (37). While most of the novel, then, is devoted to an open, non-moralistic exploration of nihilist desire, it simultaneously thematizes mimicry or mimesis as a paradoxical means of transforming the repetitive force of trauma, as a means, in other words, of overcoming trauma. It also shows us curiously how dying is perhaps not something we do only once, but rather something that we move both toward and also away from at various times in our lives.

In searching for other women authors attempting to symbolize the real—or give voice to a dark feminine erotics normally hidden and silenced—I have been impressed also by Rebecca Godfrey's *The Torn Skirt* (2001), a novel about lost or so-called "disposable" girls bent on their own destruction (166). Set in Victoria, one of Canada's supposedly most provincial cities, Godfrey exposes the dark, unseemly underside of this "City of Gardens": "Here's a gutter," writes Godfrey, "here's a straightjacket; here's a bed of tar and stone" (102). Populating this fiction is an unbecoming cast of pedophiles, derelicts, creeps, male "flesh inspectors," rapists, the high school burn out or stoner boys, self-cutters, and many troubled girls and female teenage runaways (24). At the center of the story is Sara, a sixteen year old runaway, who carries a knife in her boot, sleeps on downtown rooftops, loves "wayward girls" and "certain words [...] like [...] lacerate," and finds herself on a downward spiral, or as she says, going "where I'm not supposed to go," going "[d]own [which] is somewhere" at least (130, 127, 121, 20). This book is about risk-taking, losing control, or, as Sara metaphorically puts it, entering "the Red Zone" (98). Like many of the other novels of study in this dissertation, *The Torn Skirt* has, moreover, a narrative momentum that takes us further and further into loss and deeper and deeper into transgression. Throughout the fiction the various allusions to other limit-texts (like *Go Ask Alice* and Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*) underscore Sara's own marginalization, excessiveness, and desire for self-abandon, all of which peak when Sara ("*déshabillé*," careless, and thinking "[d]o or die. Now or never") decides literally to "off" herself by overdosing on amphetamines and Aquavit (123, 129). And yet, while Sara pursues the negativity of death, significantly she also defies death. Despite her rejection of proper subjecthood in favor of an extremist and nihilist "bad-girl" subjectivity, ultimately she refuses to suicide or "erase herself" (as some of her wayward girlfriends have done), and chooses to live instead, ultimately not wanting to die or even "read any more books where the girl dies in the end" (127, 126). Godfrey's heroine aims in the end paradoxically to make dispossession and excessiveness viable options for subjectivity. As Sara herself articulates it, she intends to know "the Secret" (go to extreme limits, experience the real, do "all kinds of things") significantly without dying or being "defeated or ruined" (136). *The Torn Skirt* ultimately, then, is about negotiating a new model of feminine subjectivity: extremist, edgy, and unlimited, but not effaced or "erased," and not in service to the old stories of death for the female protagonist.

In mentioning Godfrey, Gunn, and Schwartz at this late point in the thesis, my intention is to show that women's writing about wounding (or female limit-texts) constitute a burgeoning area of international (and not just American) literary study. In other words, the wound as the locus of the female subject is becoming increasingly pronounced in an international body of writing. What this suggests to me is that, as a category, women's writing is possibly undergoing transformation, moving away from a traditional, romantic, or affirmative thematic and toward becoming increasingly a black tradition devoted to the negative. Certainly, more and more women are embarking it seems on transgressive literary endeavors that aim honestly and uninhibitedly to expose the real of female experience. Although such writers (including Acker, Kasischke, and Steinke) create heroines disturbingly damaged and brutalized, their philosophical or political stance is I think invariably feminist. Put another way, as I have suggested throughout this thesis, although Acker, Kasischke, and Steinke (and other women authors) reveal to us the horror and degradation of the feminine margins, they additionally suggest the strength, resiliency, and glory to be found at the limits or in limit experience. These are writers, then, who provide harrowing testimony of women's pain and abuse, but who are simultaneously concerned with recovery, with both broadening the female imaginary and expanding as well the narrative repertoires available within a women's literary tradition itself.

Notes

1. Cixous's avant-garde poetic text, *FirstDays of the Year*, was first published in French in 1990 and then later in English in 1998. Although *FirstDays* is much different from the major texts of study in this thesis (gentler in a way and unconcerned largely with things like sadomasochistic violence), it shares with the works of Acker, Kasischke, and Steinke a preoccupation with the pursuit of limits, with going, as Cixous says, "where I cannot go […] *further on*. […] further. Where I'm afraid to go" (153). *FirstDays*, like many of the main texts of study, is furthermore fixated on death. The "author's awful hope," writes Cixous self-regardfully, is "to write a book of the dead […] the author […] is fond of death […]. [She] stretches out over thousands of years and augments her life with so many deaths, with so many dead. She doesn't know how to live without deaths, without all her dead, and without foreign bodies mixed up with her body. *My Deaths*. This is what the author wanted to call this book at one time" (38, 78). Essentially, *FirstDays* is a form of intertext in which Cixous's voice becomes mixed with the voices of various dead writers. Clarice Lispector, the Brazilian writer who died in 1977, is heard perhaps most poignantly in *FirstDays*. Although Cixous makes intertextual reference to Marina Tsvetaeva and Heinrich von Kleist among other writers, it is predominantly Lispector's suffering and wounding (her living "at the heart of loss" and giving "way to the other side") that Cixous "know[s] […] and [is] haunt[ed]" by (165, 61, 7).

2. Deborah Levy is a contemporary British novelist producing experimental, postmodernist fiction. Her tragi-comedic novel *Billy and Girl* (1996) is about two orphaned and damaged siblings, Billy England and his sister Girl. In Levy's narrative, we learn about Billy and Girl's childhood, in which Billy's physical abuse by his father (his having been "bashed by Dad") caused Girl to do the unthinkable and set her father on fire (9). As a consequence of their shared traumatic past, Levy's characters know "a bit about hurting," they have "pain features" and "soul-tissue damage," and they see themselves as being "in pain training" or "on […] pain pathway[s]" they "[c]an't get off" (79, 80, 87, 115, 139). Billy especially probes the wound, devoting "his life's work" to finding and excavating "the site of his injury" (87).

3. I am borrowing from Cixous, who tells us provocatively in *FirstDays of the Year* that the main character in her book ("if it lives") is "My death. Which is thy death. Your death, which is my death" (33).

4. In this conclusion, although I cite and discuss numerous contemporary women authors participating in wound culture and exploring extreme feminine experience, my discussion is necessarily exclusionary. There are in fact may other women writers who could also productively be discussed in this context. Of prime importance and demanding at least brief mention is French writer Marguerite Duras, who in books like *The Lover* (1985) and *The Malady of Death* (1986) can be seen as a pioneer woman author in the field of sadomasochistic eroticism. In *The Lover*, a book set in prewar Indochina, a Chinese man becomes the abusive lover of a fifteen year old French girl, who experiences sex, as she puts it, "really […] unto death" (43). In her darker work

The Malady of Death, Duras's heroine "of the paid nights" is seen grimly and sadistically by the text's male figure as a body "inviting strangulation, rape, ill usage, [and] shouts of hatred," and as a woman who "[w]hile she lives she invites murder" (56, 16, 33).

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